

Wild Hearts

by CuriosityRedux

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Summary: She finds him in the woods with an injured Night Fury. Feral and mysterious, the boy named Hiccup claims to be able to end the war that's raged between dragons and Vikings for centuries. Berk's been ravaged for years. She has no choice but to believe him. But that doesn't mean she has to trust him. Or fall for him.

1. Chapter 1

****Hi!** If you follow me on Tumblr, you already know the premise of this story. I'm following an AU deviation of how things might have been if Valka had been able to take Hiccup with her when Cloudjumper kidnapped her from Berk. Hiccup would have grown up completely surrounded by dragons and away from the village of his birth. This AU was created and brought to life by the brilliant avannak of Tumblr (known as The Antic Repartee here on FF). It's only because of her graciousness that I have the opportunity to write this story. Here, Hiccup returns to Berk years later to find out more about humans, his family, and his origins. Aaaaand he makes new friends. I can't guarantee that chapters will be regular. But I'll do my best not to leave anybody with unanswered questions. Hope you enjoy~**

****! ****

She couldn't shake the feeling that something in the deep fog was watching her. Hatchet held in her secure grip, Astrid glanced down at the list of ingredients Gothi had scribbled on parchment before shoving her toward the treeline. She'd have been better off with Fishlegs- botany was his thing- but with the increasing number of raids and wild dragons seen about the island lately... Well. Astrid and her hatchet would have to do.

These woods shouldn't have bothered her like they did. She'd grown up in that forest, gone on her first hunt in that forest. She knew it like she knew the scars sliced and burned and bitten across her body.

But her eyes kept wandering to the thick curls of mist that seemed to creep around trees and melt to the mossy ground. If there was one thing she trusted, it was her instincts. And her instincts told her she wasn't alone.

She decided to focus on gathering the items on the list. If anything jumped out to attack, she'd be ready. That was one thing she'd learned after the first Nightmare caught her from behind. Always be ready.

For a while, all was calm. She carried out her task as quickly as possible, not wanting to be far from the village for too long. When she came to one item, though- a kind of berry she knew to grow in a cove close by- the feeling of being watched prickled her spine once more.

"Paranoia," she swore to herself, her brow set in irritated determination. She adjusted the satchel over her shoulder and started towards the cove. Her eighteenth birthday had just passed. She was too old for the heebie-jeebies.

Astrid lifted her chin as she walked, keeping her eyes straight ahead despite the urge to check over her shoulder.

And then something moved in the trees.

It was too large to be a bird, and the sound it made as it moved from branch to branch was too heavy. She stopped. Widened her stance. Raised her hatchet just slightly.

Nothing. Silence. Not even a chipmunk scurrying to break the tension. She couldn't even pinpoint which tree exactly the noise had come from. So with longer, drawn out steps, she kept her gaze high as she continued forward.

A few moments later, there was a sound of scraping bark to her left. Her head whipped around to look, but then another quick pouncing shook the tree to her right. Astrid glared. She lifted a foot to take a step, but then she heard the whistling sound of a projectile. Her somersault landed her just feet from the spine that _thwacked _into the soft earth. Right where her foot would've landed.

"I didn't think you beasts played games!" she called out, daring the dragon to show itself. "I'm not dinner, and you're sure as Hel not getting a show." Her voice echoed through the misty woods, but she knew it heard.

After standing still for a long moment, she attempted to advance again. Just like the time before, when she reached the spine from before, another shot out in warning. She could see the cove in the distance, hear the sound of trickling water.

"Am I getting close to your _nest_?" she asked with a sneer. Her eyes scanned the trees, but the weapons seemed to be coming from lower, closer to the ground. "If you want to fight, let's fight, _dragon_."

A faint hissing sound reached her ears. She narrowed her gaze in the direction. All at once, a flurry of spines were spat her way, and she had to employ a variety of evasive tumbling techniques to avoid being

hit. In the middle of a handspring, her hand slipped on a patch of damp leaves, and she went sprawling to the ground. Annoyance bothered her more than fear, but she laughed a little as she righted herself. The ground was littered with spines, but she smiled.

It'd given away its position.

"Guess we'll find out who has the better aim," she whispered to herself. Her grip flexed on her hatchet. For a long, quiet moment, she stood and listened. Astrid took a step forward. And then another. Then, just as she lifted her foot, she saw it- horns sprouting from the formation of bushes just ahead.

She didn't have a great visual, but she knew she could make up for it with her other senses. The dragon lifted something, likely its tail, in preparation to attack once more, but as soon as the rustling sounded, she was on it. Her arm whipped out like a bow from an arrow, her hatchet flying towards its target.

She quickly removed her dagger from her boot and rolled to the side. And then she heard a sound that made her heart sink.

A metal blade splintering wood.

The dragon gave an angry snarl. Astrid's pulse raced. She'd been sure- so sure. But there was no time to be afraid. She'd just thrown away her best weapon, and her best chance now was forcing the dragon from its hiding place. With a battle cry and a prayer to Thor, she sprinted as fast as she could to the foggy corner and leapt into the bushes.

She'd expected to scrape past rough scales. She'd expected the swipe of talons or the gnash of teeth. She'd expected pain.

She hadn't been expecting to barrel into a very warm, very _human _figure.

Astrid shrieked, but wrestled the creature to the ground. It was tall- larger than her by at least a foot and fifty pounds, but hand to hand combat was her specialty. Her eyes drank in as many details as she could while deflecting blows and struggling to maintain her position of dominance. It roared and bucked beneath her, covered in a combination of scales, fur and leather. And the face that looked up at her wasn't a face- but a mask.

A wooden mask, painted with a grotesque dragon's face, and split straight down the middle by a hatchet.

Blood rushing through her ears, she took the risk of losing her grip on the creature to reach for the handle of the hatchet. It was the best decision- the wood crackled as she removed it, and the moment she pressed the blade to its neck, the dragon-man-beast stilled. She stared into its false eyes, the scrape of air through her labored lungs almost deafening in the following quiet. Beneath her, the creature's chest rose and fell as heavily as hers.

After a few long moments, her curiosity got the best of her. Her free hand wrenched from its grip- _hands, ten fingers wrapped in leather gloves_- and inched towards the mask. Astrid thought it might growl, protest, but its body seemed to go slack in defeat. Trying not to

tremble, she wet her lower lip and brushed her fingertips over the chin of the horrible mask. She ripped it away.

Eyes. Wide, beautiful eyes stared up into hers. Green eyes. _Human _eyes.

Astrid snatched her hand back, and the boy beneath her used her shock to twist her off of him. She fell numbly into a defensive position, and he backed into a crouch a few feet away. Her hand went to cover her mouth in a mixture of awe and horror.

"Who-" she tried to speak, but her voice shook. Swallowing, she tried again. "Who are you?"

The boy- _not a boy_, she corrected herself. The human was approximately her age, with bronze hair braided back into a half ponytail and a short, scruffy beard. His jawline was hard, the planes of his face narrow and masculine. A line of blood was blossoming on his cheek- exactly where her hatchet had buried in his mask. No, this was no boy. This creature was a man.

The man didn't answer. He narrowed those eyes at her and sidestepped, walking on all fours the way the dragons did just before they struck. Astrid tightened her grip on her hatchet but suddenly she wasn't sure she could use it.

She tried again. "Are you an Outcast? Do you work for Alvin?"

Again, she was met with silence. This time, though, he cocked his head at her, evaluating her.

Swallowing, Astrid absently wondered where her dagger had fallen in their tussle. She'd feel more confident with more than one weapon. "Do you- do you speak? Do you speak Norse?"

Then the young man made an interesting move forward. His back foot slid forward, turning him almost sideways, and only then did his hands follow in step. It was a terrible move, tactically speaking. It exposed his side. A perfectly good and fleshy target. But then he spoke.

"You're a villager." The tenor voice surprised her. She'd been expecting a low growl, something deep and intimidating to match the horned mask and furry costume. His single sentence wasn't a question, but a statement.

"Yes," Astrid answered slowly. Warily. "You're not. Where did you come from?"

She noticed his eyes flash quickly over his shoulder, but then he pinned her once again beneath a curious gaze. He took another strange sideways step towards her. And then, when she didn't run or attack, he took another.

"Don't touch me," she barely stammered out, taking a step back.

He seemed to be considering retreating, leaning backwards into his crouch, but then he did something she never could have anticipated. The boy took off one glove. He eased another step closer, extended a bare palm towards her, and then turned his face away.

Astrid stared at the hand, her heart thudding painfully against her ribcage. What was this? A gesture of submission? Trust? Could she accept such a thing from this feral man, armed with dragon weapons and eyes that gleamed like precious stones? He didn't look at her. He didn't move. He waited.

First, she attempted to even her breathing, taking one long, deep breath. Then she slid one hesitant foot forward. Then the other. And then, with a white-knuckled grip on her hatchet, Astrid lifted a trembling hand and brushed her fingertips across his palm. The skin she found there was creased with lines, rough with callouses, and so warm that a swell of emotion squeezed her chest.

The wild thing shifted his eyes to her, only slightly twisting his neck to gauge her reaction. She wondered how she must look- sweaty and more terrified than she'd ever been before any dragon, cheeks red from exertion. Her lips felt so dry, no matter how many times she licked them, and her braid felt frizzy and loose over her shoulder. His hand pressed gently into her fingertips. She didn't pull back.

"My name is Hiccup." She was struck again by the oddness of his voice, the nonthreatening timbre that comforted her as much as it baffled her. The name wriggled in her brain with a strange familiarity, but it was nothing she could place. "You?"

"Astrid," she whispered. Her eyes dropped to their hands, still connected by her fingertips.

Slowly, probably as not to startle her, he gently closed his fingers over hers. Her breath hitched, and she was strangely hypnotized as he reached out his other hand to wrap around hers. He pulled it closer, uncurled her stiff digits. She tried to resist the urge to clench it in a fist. Tilting his head this way and that, he traced the shape of her palm, the length of her fingers, all the while examining the appendage with focus. Then he held it flat and lined his hand up with hers so that their palms were pressed together. His fingers laced between hers.

Astrid suddenly snatched her hand away, holding it to her chest as if she'd been burned. It certainly felt like that, tingling and vibrating with little lightning shocks up her arm. She pointed the hatchet at him, and though he rocked back on the balls of his feet, he didn't step back. "What are you doing in our forest? How did you get here?"

"I'm sorry," he began, crouching low. His head dipped a little bit. "I've only known one other..._person_. You have- I didn't think you would be so..._small_."

Her expression twisted with indignation. "I'm not small! I'm perfectly average!"

The corner of his mouth twitched almost hesitantly. "I've watched the village. Seen the people. You are small." There was a strange lilt to his voice. Not quite an accent, but a subtle fluidity to his consonants. It sounded bizarre to her ears.

She leveled the hatchet. He didn't seem threatened, but she wanted

him to remember who held the weapon. "You didn't answer my questions. Who are you?"

The young man- Hiccup- straightened a little at that. He came to her shoulders while hunched over. It made her wonder how much taller he was than her standing up. "There's a war," he began. "Between the dragons and the humans."

Nodding, Astrid flicked her suspicious gaze over to his dragon mask, and then back to his face. His expression was solemn.

Hiccup didn't break eye contact with her when he told her, "I came to end it."

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2. Chapter 2

Chapter Two.

Astrid stared at the feral boy with wide eyes. The cut her weapon had left on his cheek dripped down freckled skin. Her pulse was a dull roar in her ears, and it felt like her lungs couldn't quite squeeze enough oxygen from the air. The hatchet extended in threat felt heavy in her hand, weighing down her arm.

"End it?" she breathed, her brow crinkling with utter confusion. "How are you supposed toâ€¦|_end it_?" The forest's mist seemed to enclose them in a cocoon of fog, a thick blanket that cancelled out noise, light, and maybe even reality.

The wild thing that called himself Hiccup raised up a little more. She'd yet to see him extend himself to his full height, and he stood at an angle, not fully facing her. But she could tell he was tall. Already, with still bent knees and hunched shoulders, he was at her eye level. His eyes darted all across her face, as if trying to read a language he didn't understand.

"Astrid." The sound of her name on his tongue was weird. "Your people. They do want to end the war? Right?"

She felt herself harden. It was a reaction as natural as running from rain. "I suppose. If by 'end' it, you mean kill every dragon in sight."

His response made her flinch. His upper lip curled back, and he bared his teeth with a throaty growl. But the bizarre expression only lasted a secondâ€¦" he seemed to compose himself and sigh, closing his eyes. When he opened them again, his gaze was a little less friendly. "They aren't what you think."

Astrid scowled. Hooking a finger in the neckline of her shirt, she tugged back the fabric so he could see the silvery scars of a Nadder's bite mark. "I've got more of these than I do good skin. If you sympathize with those blood-thirsty demons, you won't find any mercy from me."

He deepened into his crouch, his expression unreadable. And then with a speed she could never have expected, his hand shot out, grasping

her wrist with a painful grip and twisting. She yelped with a sudden and embarrassing fear, but hours upon hours of training had prepared her body for this. With a twirl and a sharp yank, she tore herself free and swung the hatchet. He dodged. In the next heartbeat, she successfully landed the butt of her weapon's handle across his temple.

He fell to the ground, but landed on the balls of his feet. The blinding speed with which he moved was incredible, so how had she landed that hit? He had to have let her. One hand to the mossy earth, he winced and brushed his fingertips across the side of his head. "Are you bloodthirsty?" he hissed, his teeth slightly exposed again.

Her glare narrowed, and she shook off the feeling of his hand closed around her wrist. "What?"

"You attacked me," he growled with a frown, pulling his fingers away from his newest injury. She noticed that he faced her now. No more exposing his side to her.

"You hurt me first!" Her tone was tight with irritation and disbelief.

"I'm bleeding from your little axe too." With an emotion akin to disgust, she watched him lick his knuckles and then swipe them across the cut on his cheek.

"You threw those spine things at me!"

"You were approaching with a weapon."

Astrid shook her head, both perplexed and exasperated. The hatchet lowered, but she didn't loosen her grip. "These are my woods! This is my island! How did you even get here?"

"You hate the dragons because they hurt you," Hiccup began, crawling in a circle around her. It was disorienting, and he drew closer than she felt comfortable with. "The dragons hurt you because you attack them. You attack because they're ransacking your village. But they have as much choice in coming as I do in staying." He eyed the satchel at her side with a suddenly distracted curiosity, but then refocused and glanced up at her. "Doesn't that sound as silly as you and me?"

Heat throbbed in her veins, feeling very much like contempt and anger. The boy's presence was so otherworldly, so strange, that he almost felt like a vision from one of the gods. But she'd felt the warmth of his hand against hers, experienced the little lightning shocks up her arm. He was as real as she was. And it forced her to thinkâ€

Had a dragon ever attacked her unprovoked?

She shook her head. What kind of ridiculous question was thatâ€ dragons were evil, birthed from the mouth of Hel itself. She'd watch them snap men in two with their powerful jaws. She'd felt the sting of claws rake down her chest. This young man was nothing more than a traitor to his kind.

She dug her heel into the ground. "I'm returning to my village," she coolly informed him between clenched teeth. "You'll have a few minutes to disappear from this forest and never come back."

Though she went to turn, he jumped around her, blocking her path. Astrid was taken aback by how closely he stood. And how tall he was. Standing straight, almost chest to chest with her, he had to be at least six feet. She had to look up to meet his gaze. His eyes bore down on her with something like desperation. "Do you care about your people more than you hate the dragons?"

Glowing, she took a step back to regain some of her personal space. "Nothing is more important to me than my village. That's why I'm leaving. Right now."

As she took another step to walk around him, he twisted and leaped so that he kept her captured. His movements were graceful, almost cat-like in the way he crawled and arched. "I can save your village," he said, each word clearly emphasized with earnest. "No more raids. No more lives lost—dragon or human."

Her pulse raced, her brain dizzied by the possibility. "How?"

Lowering his eyes to the hatchet in her grasp, he pressed the back of his hand against her resting arm. She was glad for her long sleeves and his remaining glove. She wasn't interested in feeling his skin against hers again. "Leave this. And I'll explain everything."

She dropped her own gaze to the hatchet. "How do I know you won't use it against me?" Suspicion filled her, almost overpowering her desire to learn what he knew. "How do I know you don't have a little dragon friend waiting to eat me?"

There was a look in his eyes at that moment—a far off sadness that made her blink in surprise. Though she didn't want to trust him, there was an undeniable honesty to him—even maybe a certain naivete endearing him to her. He brought the back of his hand higher. Gloved knuckles carefully raised to nudge her cheek. Her heart slammed in her chest, stuttering out a painful rhythm. She wasn't afraid, but she was too frozen to knock his hand aside.

"You're Astrid," he told her, cocking his head to the side. "You are the first human friend I have ever made." He spoke plainly, as if that was all the explanation she would need. Dropping his fingers, he crouched down on all fours and held out an open palm. "Put down the weapon. Follow me. Let me show you."

The blonde tightened her grip on her weapon. She stared with uneasy indecision. To go with this boy—Hiccup—even if it was on her island, it would be an entirely different place. If the things he said were true, though—Berk was weary and falling apart. The villagers were losing hope, living in fear, scraping together food and materials for weapons. If the things Hiccup said were true, she could change all that.

She let her hand relax on the handle. Then with a silent prayer, she placed the hatchet in his palm.

A beaming smile broke on his face, and for a moment, Astrid was taken

aback by the change in expression. It was a boyish smile, a child's smile, and it gave a certain charm to the young man. Then before she could say anything else, he turned and threw the weapon as far as he could into the trees.

"Hey!" she protested, her eyes wide as she watched her favorite hatchet disappear into the forest. When she whipped around to glower at him, he was crawling towards her with a lighter, more playful bounce. "Why did you do that?"

Hiccup curled around her, sniffing and inspecting her with what looked like stifled glee. His fingers traced over the studs on her skirt, tugged on her armbands, even buried themselves in the maze of her plait. "I never knew hair could be so many colors before I came here," he blurted, maybe to Astrid, maybe to himself. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her neck. "And your eyes! I know a Nadder this color!"

She yelped, trying to swat away his inspecting hands, but as soon as she'd push him off one side, he'd be at the other. A strange noise bubbled from him—a laugh—and he petted his palm over the fabric of her shirt. "So soft—"

"Are you going to tell me how to save Berk or not?" she snapped, taking a few steps back. Wrapping her arms herself with a faint sense of self consciousness, she pinned him with an accusing glare. "You said you'd explain everything."

Hiccup nodded. "Come." Seeming to regain a smidge of composure, he dropped to all fours and began crawling across the moss-covered forest floor. Astrid had to run to keep up with him, but luckily he didn't scamper far. When he reached the lip of the cove, he pulled up short and nodded towards the ground below. "Down here."

With only a little trepidation, Astrid watched him pounce easily down the tall rock face of the cove. "How come you've never seen other humans?" she called after him, attempting to climb down at a much slower speed and with much less grace. "Where do you live?"

The feral boy scraped down the side until he came to rest on a plateau. "With my mother," he replied, the first time she'd gotten a direct answer from him. "We live a day's flight from here. We care for dragons."

"Flight?" The rock was rough against her skin as she lowered herself down. Her boots didn't grasp ledges as well as she'd have liked. "You _care _for them?"

Grinning, he waited for her to land safely on the plateau. "For every human I've ever spoken to, I've met a thousand dragons." And then he was off again, easily jumping the twenty foot drop and rolling to his feet.

"I guess that explains the weirdness," Astrid muttered. She chose the sane route, easing herself down the side until she reached close enough to the ground. Then she let go and landed with a somersault. A part of her wanted to prove that she could be agile too. "How did you get here? Did a dragon bring you here?"

He gave her a short nod. "I'll tell you the whole story. But first,

you should meet Toothless."

Astrid froze. "Toothless?"

A blur in her peripheral caught her eye. Her head spun just in time to catch the sight of a sleek black dragon charging her.

She shrieked, and a sardonic voice in the back of her head mocked her for trusting the strange dragon-boy. Just as she'd suspected, the moment she turned over her hatchet, he'd led her to her death. The dragon was fast— even with all of her battle instincts, the only thing she could do was scream and throw her hands up in defense. She sprawled backwards onto her butt.

And then the boy sprang from her side, tackling the beast and throwing his arms around its neck. The dragon roared, and Hiccup hissed, and for a moment, Astrid sat in terror and awe as the two wrestled and grappled for dominance. Eventually the dragon rolled the boy beneath him, and her hand flew to her mouth to hold back a shout. It reared its head. But then— instead of ripping into Hiccup's jugular, the dragon nibbled playfully on the human's shoulder. Trembling with a flood of adrenaline, Astrid shifted to her knees and looked closer. Only gums chewed at Hiccup's furs.

"It's— It's a Night Fury," she breathed, her eyes moving over the flat black scales, the sharp claws, the outstretched wings. Though she'd never seen one up close, she knew the shape of those wings and what they looked like darting through the moonlight. Every fiber of her body was telling her to run. Get out. Tell the chief and gather a hunting party for Hiccup and his beast.

The dragon's eyes turned to her. Large, green, and wary, they flickered over her in evaluation.

"Astrid, Toothless," Hiccup introduced, sitting up on his elbows. "Toothless, Astrid."

The breaths in her lungs felt painful. She turned a fiery glare on the boy. "You brought a Night Fury to Berk?" The itch for her hatchet was terrible. "You— you—"

She tried to summon a threat, an insult that would accurately sum up her ire, but then the dragon— Toothless— hopped away from the boy and stalked towards her. It curled its body and side stepped closer, and she was struck with recognition. Its actions mimicked Hiccup's. And then it was above her, breathing hot heavy exhales onto her face.

For the second time that day, she was suddenly hypnotized by a pair of green eyes.

"Give him a scratch," Hiccup encouraged, a smile faint in his voice.

Astrid drew back as the Night Fury tilted his head at her. "I will not!" she whispered with a hostile glower. It made a strange warbling noise, and she clenched and unclenched her fists. She was fighting every irresistible urge to run, and run far. The only thing stopping her was the unbelievable amount of expression in those reptilian orbs.

In her peripheral, she watched him twist back into his crouch. He crept over to them and reached a hand under Toothless' chin. The dragon's eyes rolled back in his head. It flopped and rolled onto its back with a purr.

Astrid took the opportunity to scramble away. But she felt arms wrapping like steel around her waist, tugging her back down. "No!" Hiccup scolded, sounding sharp and authoritative. His hands found her wrists and extended them toward the beast. "Feel."

For the first time since hearing Hiccup shifting in the forest trees, she made a noise she was embarrassed by. She whimpered. It was awful enough that the feral man had his arms around her, caging her in place. But he was forcing to touch the thing that had been trying to kill her not moments ago. He pulled her hands closer to Toothless' chest, unyielding.

She flinched when her fingertips brushed over warm scales. It wasn't like when Hiccup had offered his hand for her to touch. That was familiar human skin. Thisâ€" this _pelt_â€" she'd only felt that in the heat of battle. The boy stroked her hand across the Night Fury's chest in a petting motion. Beneath her limp and uncooperative fingers, she could feel it rumbling with pleasure.

Shaking her head, she forced herself not to close her eyes like she wanted to. It felt like a dream. Hiccup, Toothless, all of it. "Hisâ€" heâ€" Astrid swallowed and tried again. "He's attacked my village for years."

"Not because he wanted to," Hiccup insisted, still drawing her hands across the dragon's smooth scales. "That's why you have to listen to me."

"Let me go first," she breathed, cutting her gaze to him so he could see the burning in her eyes. This felt soâ€" _wrong. _Sick, even. "I'll listen. Just let me go."

He granted her request, releasing her wrists and allowing her to jerk away. "Toothless didn't bring me here," he explained, rubbing his own palms across the dragon's soft belly the way he'd wanted her to. "A friend of mine did."

She assumed by 'friend,' he meant another winged beast.

Hiccup glanced down at the grass, and a sudden solemnity washed over his features. "My motherâ€" she was once a part of this tribe. She lived here, on Berk."

Astrid's eyebrows shot up at that. She tried to picture anyone like the wild thing named Hiccup every inhabiting her village. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't fathom it.

"It's a long story, but she and I were taken away. And we came to live with the dragons." He drew one knee to his chest as he spoke. "She never talked about where we came from. I never asked. But my fatherâ€" Cutting off with a strange hissing noise, Hiccup shook like an animal shaking the rain from his fur. "I wanted to know more about him."

She wrapped her arms around herself and watched him with disturbed fascination. "Your fatherâ€¦" Astrid exhaled sharply. "He'sâ€¦" he lives in the village?"

"I don't know," he answered with a bluntness, his lips twisting as he scratched at his short beard. "I don't know his name. What he looks like. Justâ€¦ he _was h_ere." His eyes were somewhere far away, and for an instant, Astrid's heart squeezed in sympathy.

"So you came to find him?"

Hiccup gave a short laugh. At his side, Toothless blinked awake and rolled to his feet. The dragon stalked off to the crystal clear lake to lap at its waters. The boy's gaze followed him. "My mother told me about how things are here. Between the humans and the dragons. The war." He squinted at the Night Fury. "We think there's something controlling them. Making them attack. Away from here, they'reâ€¦ not like that."

This was the information she'd come for. She sat up with interest. "Controlling them how?"

"A queen, she thinks." His eyes cut back to her. "A dragon like the others, but a hundred times larger. Hungrier. They sometimes can bend the will of smaller dragons."

Astrid sucked in a breath.

"Anyways, I wanted to find out more. So we couldâ€¦ So I could come back. Meet _him. _But to do that, I have to finish this war first." His expression was determined and serious. "I left home. I came to observe. But then Toothless and I collided."

At the sound of his name, the Night Fury's head popped up. His ears perked.

Hiccup gave him a reassuring wave and then looked back to Astrid. "He's injured," he told her with a lowered voice. His brow furrowed with intensity. "He can't fly. And I won't leave him to die."

It took her a moment, but the weight of what he was sharing with her suddenly settled on her chest like a boulder. Toothless was broken. Stranded. Hiccup wouldn't abandon him. By sharing that information, the wild boy was putting both of their lives in her hands.

"Iâ€¦"

She didn't know what to say. Part of her wanted to believe that this was all an elaborate ruse, and that Hiccup truly meant to use the Night Fury to attack the village come nightfall. That part wanted to sprint back to the chief, to summon a hunting party to kill the boy and dragon alike. But something deeper in her gut was telling her to wait. _Not yet_, it said. _Not yet._

She didn't get a chance to reply. A new sound suddenly cut through the tension. A blast of familiarity burning through the bizarre cocoon she'd been enveloped in.

"Astrid!" a voice echoed through the woods. Snotlout Jorgenson,

calling her name. "Astrid! Are you alive?"

The two went still. Hiccup was on his hands and feet in a half-breath, his teeth bared toward the sound. Toothless had looked up and adopted a similar defensive stance.

Astrid forced herself to stand, shocked at the weakness in her knees. "They're looking for me," she whispered. "I've been gone too long." When she started to turn to start up the rock wall of the cove, a hand reached for her.

Hiccup took her by the upper arms. "You can't let them find him," he hissed, his eyes bright and desperate. "Promise you won't lead them here." He shook her. "_Promise._"

She tore away. "I promise," she replied with a glower. "For now. I have to go." Scrambling towards the plateau, she looked over her shoulder at him. "If I see either of you near the village, I'll skin you alive."

"Astrid! Astrid, can you hear me?"

"Come back tomorrow," he requested, drawing too close to her again.

She stepped away, her heart pounding. "Remember. Don't come near Berk."

And then she turned without a second glance and began her race to reach the top.

!

3. Chapter 3

****Chapter Three.****

Astrid didn't sleep that night. She lay awake, fingers flexing on the handle of her axe, waiting to hear the high pitch whir of a Night Fury and know that she had betrayed Berk. There wasn't even a heaviness in her eyelids to distract her- only a quiet panic that kept her torn between running to the cove and running to the chief.

She thought about Hiccup. Glaring up at her ceiling, she shifted beneath her blankets and wondered if his furs protected him from the cold. She rubbed her knotted stomach and wondered what he'd eaten. She wasn't sure how long he'd been stranded with that dragon in the cove, and she counted back the days since their last raid. Had there been a Night Fury that night?

Her wrist hurt. A bruise blossomed along the pale skin, exactly where the feral boy had grabbed it. When the thought made her angry, she thought about what he'd said-

"_Doesn't that sound as silly as you and me?_"

Easy to say, over a bruise and a cut on the cheek. But when she thought about the lives ruined and lost thanks to the dragons, it was

hard to think of the vicious cycle as silly.

Assuming there was a cycle. That Hiccup's words were true, and that the dragons were being controlled by some larger, outside force. Thinking of Toothless, and those huge, expressive eyes, she sighed with frustration and tried to ascertain whether it was a tame monster or a deadly house pet. And which would be the lesser evil.

She ended up falling into a troubled sleep just a little before dawn. For the first time in a long time, she slept in. Skipped training. When her mother came in to rouse her, she was lost in a nightmare where Berk was burning and a man's graceful silhouette crawled through the shadows.

Astrid didn't go back to the cove. Instead, she stood outside the kill ring, leaning on the cage-like roof. A new generation of young Vikings was being prematurely entered into training, and she watched tight-lipped as Gobber led a handful of children through drills. Their people had been decimated with the lack of food, the violence, and the bitter winters. Berk was dying, and they were raising little ones to fight for it.

As the chief's right hand man pulled a switch to raise the gate of a Nadder's keeping, she knelt down to watch the kids below outrun sprays of hot magnesium-fire. Astrid had a small scar on the back of her arm from flames like that. Emotions battled in her chest, a dangerous hope and practical realism. Suspicion and instinct. She tried to picture the bright blue Nadder looking at her with the same kind of curiosity and calmness that Toothless had expressed. Her eyes narrowed as its snapping jaws just barely missed the back of one skinny girl.

"Oi!"

Astrid ripped her gaze from the children to see their teacher staring up at her. Gobber squinted against the gray morning sunlight and lifted his hammer-arm to shield his face. "Care to come down and show 'em how it's done?"

She stood wordlessly, unstrapping her axe from her back and making her way around the dome. The tunnel leading down had been shut off so that the dragon wouldn't escape, so she had to wait for Gobber to crank it open enough for her to duck under. At her entrance, the little class of pre-teens scurried to the closest wall and stared at her with wide eyes. She knew they watched her like that. All the children watched her, ever since she earned the honor of killing her first dragon at fourteen. It was part of what fueled her- the idea that there were others looking up to her.

And it was partly why Hiccup's words terrified her.

The Nadder tilted its head at her when she entered the ring, and she twirled the axe in her grip. Taking a smooth breath through pursed lips, Astrid tried to clear her mind of outside distractions. It was a necessity, she had learned, for survival. She couldn't think about other things when she stood toe to toe with a beast ten times her size. Emptying her thoughts made her capable of responding with speed and accuracy. But no matter how many slow breaths she tried, her brain wouldn't settle.

"Okay," she whispered to herself, widening her stance and bending her knees just slightly. "This is life or death. Don't show fear. Save the village."

With that, she sprang, making a charge for the dragon with her axe held high. The Nadder immediately belched a stream of white-hot fire, which she avoided with a graceful somersault. The heat of it warmed her left side, warning her of the pain that awaited if she stepped wrong. Reaching into her belt, she shot a throwing knife at one of the dragon's feet. It landed just above one talon-tipped toe, and the beast shrieked. Its wings beat wildly as it shook its foot, trying to dislodge the painful nuisance. When it finally kicked the blade free, the Nadder gave Astrid a vicious hiss and whipped a tail full of poisonous darts her way.

The blonde fell flat to the ground, the air smacking out of her lungs as she hit the stone floor. The spines whistled above her, and she heard Gobber yelp behind her just before the projectiles landed with sharp cracks. A laugh went up from one of the kids.

As quickly as she had thrown herself down, she was back up on her feet, sidestepping a circle around the bird-like dragon. It advanced first this time, but instead of running or avoiding the dragon, Astrid knew this was her time to run straight ahead. She dove beneath its blind spot and rolled under its large head. With a grunt of effort, she swung the axe across the Nadder's thin thighs. Blood splattered her arms. The creature made a terrible scream of pain and fell to the side.

Astrid leaped out of the way just before it crashed down on her. Then she lifted her axe above her head and slammed her boot down on the dragon's neck so its teeth couldn't snap at her. Then every nerve in her arms went numb.

The girl stood there with her killing blow held between her fingers, her breaths heavy and her face contorted with a murderous rage. But as time seemed to still, she found herself wondering at the hate surging through her. She thought of the way Hiccup had snarled at her when she mentioned killing dragons, and a flash of uneasiness stirred in her gut. The dragon went limp beneath her foot, seemingly accepting its fate. Astrid grit her teeth.

Then she let her arms fall. The weapon hung uselessly at her side.

She closed her eyes. Took another long, slow breath. Then she opened her eyes and glared at the Nadder.

"Go!" she shouted in its face, pointing the axe toward the man-made cave the beast had emerged from. When it only lifted its head and blinked in confusion, she bared her teeth and growled the way she'd seen the wild boy do. "Get in your cage! Go! _Go!_"

The creature responded with terror in its eyes, trying to struggle onto its feet, but it screeched in pain and flopped over. Astrid's expression twisted with horror as she watched the pathetic, bleeding thing use its wings to flap and pull itself to its cage. Her stomach lurched. She had to turn her back on Gobber and the children so they wouldn't recognize the disturbed gape, the urge to cover her mouth with her hand. As it floundered and yelped back into the cage,

Astrid's eyes followed the smeared trail of bright red leading right back to her feet.

She could hear the Nadder's whimpering even after Gobber closed the gate. A silence went up from the humans, and she swallowed. They watched her. They were always watching her.

She should have slept that night. The weight of her heart, of her head, of her body- it was all unbearable and crushing, and all she wanted was to close her eyes and not see Hiccup's face or the Nadder's bleeding thighs for five minutes. Long enough for the conflict in her veins to settle and for sleep to claim her, but Astrid wasn't granted that mercy. She hadn't even undressed before throwing herself on her bed and resting her arm over her face. She was glad for that now- it meant she could slip outside the Hofferson house without having to restyle her hair or change clothes.

The cold night air in her lungs cleared her thoughts a little. She leaned back against the closed front door and slid down until she was sitting. Stretching out her legs in front of her, she stared ahead at her neighbor's sheep pen and tried to think about nothing. There was a heavy humidity to the atmosphere, like it might rain or sleet at any moment, and the wet thickness grounded her a little. Her limbs felt so tired. Her mouth tasted so terrible.

Just as she was about to let her eyelids fall, a blur of motion in her peripheral made her heart stutter and speed. She sat up and squinted into the dark, but nothing looked amiss. Still- a little part of her already knew what was darting through the shadows, and that small voice urged her back to her feet. She stood, hands curling into fists, and with a muttered swear, she jogged in the direction of the movement. All the lights in the village were off, except for a dim glow coming from the Great Hall and Stoick the Vast's house. Her boots on gravel sounded like explosions against the quiet.

Astrid slowed, looking to her left and right. She saw nothing. No flickers or flashes or hints of a wild thing stalking through the night. She spent a few minutes wandering through the village, checking behind houses and around bushes. A frown crossed her lips as her search turned up nothing, and she began to wonder if she'd just seen a bat or a squirrel. Or maybe nothing- maybe she was so exhausted that she was beginning to hallucinate.

She was just starting to convince herself of the latter when she heard the sound of something shifting above her. Her head snapped up just in time to see a black shadow overtaking her, and then she was tackled to the ground.

Though she started to scream, she forced her mouth shut with a snap and rolled with Hiccup. He wrestled her to the hard earth, and though she'd been able to overtake him in the woods, he had caught her off guard. And, it would seem, he had a flexibility and strength that he hadn't revealed to her the day before. Astrid growled and writhed, trying to escape his grasp as he locked her legs in place and twisted her arms above her head. She arched her back and bucked her hips against him, but she was only answered by a playful chuckle and the weight of him pressing down on her chest. It was then that she realized how his body was flush against hers.

"I swear to _Thor_, I will tear you limb from limb," she hissed,

keeping her voice quiet for reasons not completely clear to herself. "I told you to _stay away_ from the village and Odin can strike me dead if I don't kill you and your dragon both!"

"You didn't come," he told her, his breath hot on her face. She could just barely make out a glint of a reflection from his eyes in the dark. "I needed to talk to you."

Astrid fixed him with a glare, though she wasn't sure how much of it was wasted in the shadows. "Get. Off. _Now._"

"Will you attack me if I do?"

"Probably," she snapped.

There was a sharp exhale of warmth on her cheeks then, and she noticed a humor in his expression. "Well that's not much of an incentive for me, is it?"

"Hiccup, I will _gut _you!"

He laughed then, and the noise had a strange effect on her nerves. It both grated against them and eased them in the same heartbeat. Giving a last jerk in an effort to dislodge him, she found herself slammed back against the ground. She sighed with irate exasperation.

"Why didn't you come back?" he asked. His head cocked in a way that reminded her of the Nadder.

"I don't know," she growled between clenched teeth. "But if you care about whether or not people find out about that Night Fury, you'll want to remove yourself before I start screaming."

The amusement disappeared from his body language, but he did as she demanded. In one smooth movement, he untangled his legs from hers and pounced to the side. He crawled around her as she pushed herself up and brushed at her clothes. "I have questions."

"Yeah, I have a few myself." Her eyes cut to her surroundings, checking to see if anyone had lit a candle or thrown open their shutters because of their scuffle. It didn't seem so, but just in case, she rose to her feet and beckoned him forward. "Not here. Come on."

He followed her on hands and feet, and she glanced at him sideways as they walked in silence. It was still bizarre to her, the way he moved and behaved, but it lent a credence to his story of being raised with dragons. In a way, it was a bit of the reason that she was inclined to believe him. Shaking her head and sighing, she looked ahead and led him away from the villagers, over the bridge to the kill ring.

They ducked inside the entrance tunnel, but she didn't take him inside.

"Okay," she began, folding her arms over her chest. "What do you want?"

He seemed distracted, his eyes scanning every inch of his surroundings. His fingers were walking over the crank used to raise

and lower the gate, examining the craftsmanship with fascination. It seemed that he hardly cared about her question. But then he replied, "I told you. I want to stop the war."

She sneered, but didn't argue. "You said you had questions."

Hiccup nodded, and looked back at her with curious eyes. The moonlight was a little brighter where they were, and she could see him better. "Why can't I come into the village?"

Her gaze was flat. "Besides the obvious?" she asked, holding a hand out to indicate the way he was crouched on all fours. "I don't trust you to not hurt my people."

Lifting a brow at her, he rose up on two feet. It seemed awkward on him, like he couldn't resist hunching over slightly, but it was an improvement. "If I wanted to harm the humans, why would I have waited this long? Why would I bother trying to earn your trust?"

Astrid pursed her lips in a scowl. The way he said "the humans," as if he wasn't one- it was weird.

"Trying to get inside information? Trying to learn when and where to cause the most damage? Waiting for your dragon buddies to come back you up? Waiting for-"

"Okay, okay." He rolled his eyes in a very teenage boy way. It took her aback for a moment, made her anger soften a little. "How can I prove I won't hurt them? I just want to watch. See." His expression dropped a little with earnest. "My- my dad might be one of you."

She tried not to sigh as heavily as she wanted to. For a moment, she'd almost forgotten what he'd said about his parents once being part of Berk. "For now you just have to... lay low." Shaking her head, Astrid remembered that the village came first. She had people to protect, and for the time being, that meant keeping the outsiders _out_. "Where's your Night Fury?"

"Toothless? I told you." He nodded his head vaguely toward the direction of the forest and its hidden cove. "He can't fly. He's stuck down there. We've tried to get him out, but the walls are too tall."

"So how do you expect to stop this war with just you and a toothless, flightless dragon?" He'd yet to unveil some grand master plan to her.

His nose crinkled as his eyes cut to the distance. "I don't have it all figured out yet. For now, I'm just trying to keep Toothless safe. Then I figured I could wait until the next raid." He looked back at her. "I can get one of them to listen to me, give me a ride. It'll take me to where the queen is, and then I can figure out how to defeat it."

"_Ride _it?" It was like how he'd called his home a day's flight from Berk. "Like on its back?"

"Or neck," he replied with a shrug. "Depending on the dragon."

Astrid shook her head but didn't stop staring in disbelief. "You just get stranger and stranger."

His lips spread into a smile. "It's only strange to you because you've never done it." When he took a step inside her personal space, she could tell that he was trying hard not to lean over onto his hands. "Give me one chance. One flight to prove you wrong. About everything."

Her nostrils flared as she pulled back, annoyed by his constant habit of getting too close. "_Me_? You want _me _to fly on a dragon?"

Hiccup nodded with obvious enthusiasm, grinning. "Just one flight. And then you can turn me in if you want."

She didn't miss how he didn't say _me and Toothless_.

"And just what do you expect me to fly on?" she bluffed with a scoff. "Your dragon's injured, remember?" For a breath, she thought about the Night Fury trapped in that cove. The supply of fish in the lake there had to be getting low, if both he and Hiccup had been feeding from it. "What... what's wrong with him?"

The feral young man's face turned grim. "His tailfin," he explained, his smile gone. "The left one was torn off when he and I collided. It throws off his balance. Keeps him from staying in the air."

What about a prosthetic? She wanted to ask, but for some reason, she stayed quiet. Until she knew more about that Night Fury, Astrid didn't want to give it any more killing power than it already had. Still, she sympathized with it. It made her think.

"There is something you can do," she began quietly, tearing his gaze away to look at the ground. "In the meantime."

"For Toothless?" His voice sounded so hopeful that she almost mentioned the idea of a prosthesis again.

"No. Um." Turning her head to the kill ring, she nodded into the arena. Shame burned her cheeks, and she prayed the moonlight wouldn't give it away. "A Nadder. It's hurt. Do you... do you want to look at it?"

The hope dashed from Hiccup's face, but a determination took its place. "Yes."

Astrid started to lead him inside, but then she pulled up short, whirling on him. "If you use anything I show you now against me in the future, I swear on my life I won't hesitate to tell everyone exactly where Toothless is. I'll lead the hunt myself." Her tone was fierce, and this time she entered _his _personal space. If acting like an animal was the only way to communicate to him her sincerity, so be it.

"I won't," he assured her. "I just want to stop the killing."

She searched his face, wishing she could spot a glimpse of dishonesty or ulterior motives. It would make things so much easier if he was the villain mastermind she wanted to think of him as. When she found

none there, she tore away and stalked into the training ring. Once they were both inside, she cranked the gate closed and prayed the noise wouldn't wake anyone. In the moonlight, the shadows cast by the metal, netted dome appeared sinister, and they flickered over her pale skin like spidery black fingers.

Approaching the Nadder's cage, Astrid chewed at her lower lip. She wasn't sure how the dragon would behave or even, if she was honest, whether or not it was alive. But if the beasts were what Hiccup claimed they were, hopefully he'd be able to treat it. Preferably without losing any of his or her body parts. She hadn't brought a weapon. It made her nervous.

"It's in here," she murmured, walking over to the lever. He dropped back to all fours, and she watched him nervously as she took a deep breath and shoved the heavy metal bar as far down as she could.

The dragon didn't burst from its cage like it had with the young Vikings. Astrid noticed that much right away. She couldn't see into the little cave for all the darkness and shadow, but that didn't seem to bother Hiccup. He crawled forward slowly. And then, to her immense surprise, he began making a series of clicks and purrs with his mouth.

There was motion from inside. The darkness shifted, and the blood froze in Astrid's veins as Hiccup disappeared into the black. Her pulse raced, her breathing heavy, but she told herself that as long as she could hear his bizarre little noises, he wasn't being eaten alive.

The feral boy scampered back out, making a gesture at the dragon inside with his head. He lowered himself down on his forearms and cooed.

After a long, painful moment, the shadows melted. She heard the scrape of talons against stone, and then she was holding her breath as the Nadder she'd nearly killed came limping out of its prison. The nighttime made it difficult to see, but the creature made little pathetic chirps with each shuffling step, and Astrid could make out the blood crusted and oozing from the deep slashes on its upper legs.

Hiccup made more clicking noises, drawing the dragon further and further out of the alcove. When it was fully out, its head turned and tilted at her. She froze with panic but didn't let the lever to the cage go. Its eyes were bright in the dim light, and though its pupils spent a moment narrowing and widening at her, the dragon eventually looked away. It limped toward Hiccup, until the feral man crawled forward and stretched up. He rubbed his face against the Nadder's chest. Then he slid his hands up its throat until he reached its jaw. He gave a little scratch, and just like Toothless had done the day before, the Nadder purred and rolled onto its back with a slump.

"What happened to her?" he asked once the dragon was resting, his expression broken as he crawled over to inspect her wounds. His voice was tight, and she suspected a little angry.

"A fight," she answered with a thick tongue. She'd never been a good liar, but she hoped that Hiccup's exile from humans would keep him

from noticing her uncomfortable tone and torn gaze. It made her question why she thought she needed to lie to him.

The way he exhaled sharply through his nose revealed his irritation. She could just barely make out the clench of his jaw. "It won't kill her," he said flatly, and Astrid got the impression that he was upset with her. Even though he probably didn't know it was her axe's slice in the creature's thighs. "I can heal her, but it'll take several days. I'll need to make a poultice. I need some things."

Guilt wouldn't stop wracking her, even as her own moral compass spun wild and confused. Dragons were evil. Had swarmed and attacked her village forever. But staring at that pitiful Nadder, Astrid couldn't help but swallow down the roughness in her throat. "I'll get you what you need."

"When was the last time she ate?"

"I don't know."

He was quiet for a long moment. She could sense a tension, an unhappiness rolling off of him in waves.

"Don't forget," she whispered. "They've done as much to us too. And worse."

Hiccup gave a humorless laugh. "And yet I still want to save you from yourselves." He shook his head. It wasn't easy to tell whether he meant the Vikings, the dragons, or both of them. "Will you be able to take care of her while I'm not here?"

And there he went, putting yet another life in her hands. Hiccup, Toothless, and now this Nadder that she'd injured. She had to wonder, even as she nodded, if her grasp was as steady as he believed.

!

4. Chapter 4

****Chapter Four.****

"Hey, Fishlegs!" Astrid set down the basket of fish she'd been carrying on her hip and jogged over to Berk's unofficial dragon know-all.

The young man, who'd been lugging a load of scrap metal to the forges, slowed to a stop when he heard his name being called. Struggling not to drop any of the precariously stacked pieces of steel, he used a knee to push a chunk back into place. "Hey, Astrid. What's going on?"

The blonde swallowed, realizing that she hadn't exactly thought the conversation through. "Need a hand?" she asked with an awkward half-laugh, reaching up to take the mountaintop of metal from his hands. Sighing in relief, he bent his knees so she could transfer some of the scraps to her own arms.

"Thanks," he told her, continuing on the path he'd been struggling

down. "Gobber's been working me like a crazy man ever since we lost all those weapons in the explosion two weeks ago." Fishlegs shook his head. "I smell scrap metal in my sleep."

Astrid gave an _mmm_ of sympathy, feeling the corners and sharp edges of steel digging into her shirtsleeves. "Still, it's nice of you to volunteer to help him with the dragons and everything. He's had a lot on his shoulders lately."

"Yeah, I'm still not ready to actually get _close_ to the dragons, but getting to see them is cool." In the past few months, the large Viking had become Gobber's go-to guy for all of his work. An assistant, somewhat, to run his errands and do his dirty work. That was why Astrid had called his name without thinking when she saw him. She needed access to the dragons and maybe even some welding. Fishlegs could be her in.

"I was thinking," she began as they passed through the village. "I don't really mind working with the dragons so much. They don't scare me anymore, and I can handle myself if they get out of hand." Looking at him out of the corner of her eyes, she suggested, "Why don't you guys let me handle feeding them and stuff?"

Fishlegs blinked at her. They were approaching the forge, and she followed him around the back, where Gobber kept forever shrinking piles of scraps. "It sounds like a good idea to me," he told her with a shrug. "I guess you could talk to Gobber about it."

"How often do we feed them anyways?" She hoped her tone didn't sound _too_ curious- she was already feeling suspicious gazes on her back, even if they were all in her mind.

Shrugging, he dropped his giant stack of metal onto the grass and began sorting it. "Once a day or two. The chief wants to keep them weak so they can't do much damage if they break out."

Astrid nodded, feeling the new knowledge being filed away into a list of grievances the dragons had to hold against the Vikings. It was strange, experiencing such an acute pity, and a vengeful apathy in the same heartbeat. She let the scraps in her arms fall to the ground. "Well. Okay then. Just wondering."

She thought about venturing inside the forge to talk to Gobber about the matter, but she'd left her basket of fish further back in the village, and the metal-worker didn't generally enjoy being bothered during the day anyway. With a friendly wave goodbye, she left Fishlegs and wandered back down the path they'd come. Lips pursing as she thought, she wondered about the likelihood of Legs being able to design or forge a prosthetic tail fin for Toothless. It was probably much too early in his training, though. If anything, she'd have to get one from Gobber. And that was toeing into dangerous territory.

With some tactfully requested help from Fishlegs, though, she could probably use Hiccup's knowledge of dragons to design something. Then, if she requested the tail to be made in pieces, she could put it together herself. Maybe she could even try and split some pieces between Legs and Gobber so neither of them saw the entire thing. Surely if Gobber could have six interchangeable prosthetic hands, she could figure out a way to make a tailfin for the Night Fury in the

forest.

On that note, she quickly located her basket and hitched it back onto her hip. This was her least favorite part of her uneasy truce with Hiccup so far- sneaking around her own village. It would be strange for her to be seen entering the woods with such a cumbersome load and then returning empty handed. Still, she wasn't sure how much the boy and his dragon had been able to eat. Hiccup could probably hunt, but was it enough for the two of them?

The woods seemed colder that afternoon, but less foggy and treacherous. It almost looked like a different place, she thought as she moved through the trees. Not as mysterious or supernatural. Just a normal chilly day in Berk's forests.

Astrid took the back way to the cove so that she didn't have to climb down the cliff-face with the fish in tow. Instead, she was able to go down the far side and under a tunnel-like cave's mouth, which opened into the sparkling clearing. That afternoon, it seemed quiet and peaceful. Neither the Night Fury or his boy were anywhere in sight.

"Hiccup!" she called out, not wanting to shout too loud lest someone passing by happen to hear. "Hiccup, are you here?"

The wild man didn't appear, but as she walked further in, she felt eyes on her. Then she spotted Toothless perched on one of the taller sets of boulders that rested around the walls of the cove. His tail waved in a way she couldn't quite place as either territorial or curious. The Night Fury raised up on his haunches and then pounced down in front of her, crawling over with slitted eyes.

"Hey- hey there," she breathed, backing away with every step the dragon took towards her. "Hey, Toothless. I'm a friend of Hiccup's." Her heartbeat was picking up a little bit. She had her axe attached to her back, just in case something happened, but she shoved down the urge to reach for it. Holding out the basket so he could see, she tried to keep the nerves out of her voice. Where was Hiccup?

"Here you go," she whispered, seeing the dragon's ears perk with interest at the sight. "Food." With careful, steady movements, she set the basket down between them, never taking her eyes from the creature. When she pushed it over, and fish of various shapes and sizes spilled across the grass, he pulled up short.

Toothless lifted a paw and leaned forward, sniffing at the offering. Then there was a sudden and slick noise, and Astrid fell backwards with a yelp. Where the Night Fury had once had only slimy pink gums, now there flashed a row of sharp, white teeth. He snapped at a large cod, gulping it down in two bites before moving onto the next fish. It seemed that he'd lost interest in the girl, and he payed her no more mind as he filled his belly. Meanwhile, Astrid watched with wonder and alarm, scooting back until she was sitting against a boulder.

When all of the fish had been eaten, Toothless dug his head into the basket, searching for more. Astrid felt a hesitant amusement tugging at her mouth at the sight, but then he dropped the basket and whirled to look at her. She sat up, leaning back against the rock. "That's all I brought," she hissed with a bit of fear. "I don't have anything

else!"

But he advanced all the same, sniffing her up and down like he had the first time he'd met her. Then he turned in a circle, laid at her feet, and rolled over onto his belly. His eyes closed, but when she didn't immediately move to pet him, like she suspected he wanted, he peeked one eye open at her. She tried to inch to the side, but when she put her hand down to push away, he took her wrist between gummy jaws and set her hand on his chest.

She breathed a laugh. "Shameless beast," she told him, her hand shaking as she felt that warm, scaly skin beneath her touch once more. It still stirred a bit of revulsion in her gut, but she didn't feel the need to snatch her arm back. Not after stroking the Nadder's horn in comfort the night before, while Hiccup rubbed a mushy poultice into her wounds. Toothless made a noise of pleasure as she lightly caressed his breast bone, too hesitant to apply any heavier pressure than her fingertips. His eyes closed once more.

"Playing nice?"

The familiar voice sent Astrid's head snapping up- sitting on the large boulder she'd leaned against was the feral man himself. His grin was lopsided, and he held something in his hands that Astrid hadn't seen before. It was like a large staff, one end tipped with a sharp, curved blade like a small scythe. And then the other side widened into a heavy looking bulb, likely used for bludgeoning. The weapon was covered in intricate carvings and even some scribbled runes, though she couldn't make them out from that distance. Hiccup leapt down and held the staff at an angle behind him as he crawled around the Night Fury.

"Where have you been?" she asked, suspicion in her tone. She didn't like the idea of him wandering around the woods alone, much less the thought that he might venture too close to the village.

"Exploring," he answered, a playfulness hidden in his expression that he seemed to know would irritate her. "I see you and Toothless have become best buds." His hand joined hers on the dragon's chest, and he trailed his palm down the soft underbelly.

Astrid pulled her hand away self consciously, though Toothless gave a dissatisfied grunt. "I came to talk to you about something. I brought food."

"I saw," Hiccup nodded. "Thanks for saving me some, Toothless." Giving the dragon a nudge, he pinned him under a sardonic glance.

"Well." Astrid unhitched the axe from her back and retrieved the package she'd smuggled beneath the weapon. "I brought the fish for him. This was for you."

Cocking his head to the side, the boy accepted the flat, cloth-covered gift and brought it to his nose to sniff. He set aside the staff. His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What is it?"

Reaching over the happy dragon, she pulled back the corners of the napkin and unfolded it to reveal the pastries inside. "We had some left over from dinner last night," she informed him, noticing the

savory scent of baked goods despite the fact that they'd been long cooled. She'd stared at them for a long moment as her mother put them out next to their breakfast, and then- swearing that it was stupid to waste food when it was so scarce- she'd wrapped up a few for the wild thing. "Those two are mutton patties. And that one's blackberry."

He continued to sniff them with obvious delight. She wrinkled her nose when his tongue darted out to give the flaky, slightly burned pastry a lick.

"Just bite it," she ordered with a growl.

He obeyed, using a flat hand to crush the entire napkin to his mouth. Though she rolled her eyes, she didn't try to correct him again. His eyes were glimmering with enthusiasm as he chewed, cheeks as full as a chipmunk's. "Mm!" he mumbled. Crumbs stuck to his lips. Another string of words followed, but through his large bite, she couldn't understand a thing.

"I guess your mother never taught you table manners?" she asked dryly, sitting her elbow on her knee and resting her chin against her fist.

"What's that?" he inquired, spitting flakes of dough all over Toothless' belly. As soon as he swallowed, he was shoving more of the pastries into his mouth.

"Table manners?" Astrid raised a brow. "No elbows on the table? Chew with your mouth closed? Take small bites...?" When not even a glimmer of recognition was mirrored in his expression, she sighed. "Maybe you really are a Viking then."

That seemed to interest him. "Vikings don't use table manners?"

It was her turn to tilt her head at him. His dark mood from the night before seemed to have slipped away. He'd been unhappy with the way the Nadder had been treated, and for a moment she thought he might lose interest in observing Berk and its people. But at the very mention of them, he seemed to snap back to his usual curiosity. "We're not the most civilized sort, no," she allowed. "Though it varies from house to house and island to island."

"So..." His expression was thoughtful, and he glanced to the ground as he chewed. "Every human on Berk is a Viking... but not every Viking is on Berk?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "For the most part."

"Hmm."

There was a moment of peaceful quiet as he finished the pastries with barely concealed delight. Astrid let her eyes move over his face, his heavy furs and dragon-scale armor, his dirty hands and long nails. She faintly wondered what he'd look like behind his wildness. At least the braids in his hair didn't look matted, and from the neck-up, his slightly tanned skin was clean. It was clear that he spent most of his life outdoors.

Toothless suddenly gave a rumble and twisted to his front. Pulling away from the two, he ambled away, and Astrid watched his

asymmetrical tail whip from side to side as he moved. The Night Fury looked up at the sky for a long minute, and then seemed to exhale heavily and continue walking to a shady corner of the cove.

"I have an idea," she admitted, not looking away from the dragon. "For Toothless."

Hiccup, who'd been picking at his clothing for bits of lost pastry, snapped his gaze up to her face. "To get him out?"

Shaking her head, she reached beneath her shirt's neckline and pulled out the sketch she'd hidden earlier that day. "To make him fly." She unfolded the parchment, smoothing out the creases and setting it down in front of him. "Have you ever heard of a prosthesis?"

"No."

She pursed her lips. "You've watched the village, right?"

He gave her a wary look, telling her what she already knew.

"What about the man with the wooden leg and the hammer for an arm?"

Hiccup nodded slowly. "I've seen him once or twice. Not close up."

Astrid held out a hand, as if presenting Gobber as an example. "His hand and foot were eaten by Monstrous Nightmares," she said, "so he had a new leg and a new arm created for him. I was playing around with the idea of designing something similar for Toothless."

"That's incredible! What would you use? It would have the structure to withstand high speed winds, but also flexible enough that it could bend and move during flight." Hiccup immediately began to babble about the movement of tailfins during flight, using his hands to describe the way they fan out and collapse to either sustain height or shift to new altitudes. She could tell he'd spent an enormous amount of time studying dragons and their flight, because he seemed to know not only the physiology behind it, but the basic principles of physics involved as well. Some of the things he was explaining went over her head, and she'd put a silver down that she'd had a better education than him.

"Hiccup, Hiccup, Hiccup!" She had to stop him, throwing up her hands in front of her. "You're going too fast. I don't understand half of what you're saying."

He immediately snapped his mouth shut, his fingers held tilted midair as he demonstrated the position of a tailfin in motion. It was a little charming, and she felt something tug at the corner of her mouth. "Sorry." His eyes cut to the little drawing she'd sketched out. "Is this something you could make?"

That was when she had to shake her head, brow furrowing with disappointment. "No. But..." She picked up the piece of paper and folded it back up, slipping it back into her breast bindings. "But I might be able to get somebody else to. If we can figure out how to make it work."

His beaming smile was so bright, it made her chest feel a little warm. "We can. We will."

Astrid pressed her lips together, nodding uneasily. She had to tell herself that she could trust Hiccup, that he knew what he was doing. She had to believe that he really only wanted to end the fighting between the dragons and humans. There was no going back now, no pretending that this wasn't happening. Something had been put into motion by the gods to bring Hiccup to Berk, and Astrid was powerless to stop it.

Seeming to notice her pensiveness, the feral boy crawled forward on his hands and knees, stopping just inches from her. She was instantly uncomfortable with his closeness, but she had her back against the boulder and couldn't move. He had her cornered, but his expression was innocent, and she wondered for a brief moment what he knew about the women of his species.

But then she shook her head of that thought.

"You're thinking about serious things," he murmured, those deep green orbs seemingly piercing into her thoughts. Her heart pounded, skipping in double time when he reached a hand up to gently stroke her hair. If he noticed her discomfort, he didn't show it, petting her head like he might pet Toothless.

Astrid gave him a curt, "Yes." She would have felt safer if she hadn't taken her axe off. Now she was incapable of breaking his eye contact, and her hands groped blindly across the ground at her sides. "I worry about my village. What you could do to it."

His face fell. "You still think I'd hurt them?" After burying his fingers in her braid, his hand stilled.

She clenched her jaw. "I think you'd hurt them before you'd hurt a dragon." Though she wasn't completely happy with the way he constantly invaded her space and touched her without permission, she didn't want to give him the impression that he could scare her. "What if you're wrong about a queen controlling them? What if they're exactly what we think they are? Will you side with them? Or us?"

He didn't answer that. His mouth curled into a frown. "I'm not wrong," was all he said. "Just one flight. You'll see." His thumb moved smoothly over her hair, and then his eyes cut down to look at the blonde plait. Quiet as a ghost, he tugged until he'd freed a single golden lock. Astrid froze but didn't stop him. Her heart felt like a bird caught in the rafters of the barn, wings beating helplessly at the roof. As long as he's just inspecting, she told herself when she wanted to shove him away. As long as it's just curious.

Hiccup was almost straddling her legs, she realized with a swallow, heat rising to her cheeks. She cursed his mother's negligence for not teaching him how to interact with a woman. She could feel the warmth of his breath on her face while his eyes stared intently at the lock in his hand. He twisted and curled and wrapped it around his finger. He lifted it to the light and squinted at the colors that glinted in the sunshine. Astrid was sure her braid was ruined now, which meant that she'd have to untie and redo it before returning to the village, but she wasn't as irritated as she should have been.

"You should move," she finally said after several minutes of being subjected to his nearness. "This- this isn't how humans do things." Her words were punctuated by the sound of her trying to swallow the sudden thickness in her throat.

That worked. He dropped her hair and crawled off of her, sitting back on his heels. He was still unusually close, but it was enough space that she could begin pulling oxygen from the air again. "Why not?"

"Friends don't sit like that," she told him, trying to summon a sternness to her voice. "And they don't touch each other's hair."

"Why not?" It was like speaking to a child.

"It's not... appropriate." Her brain worked for a way to explain it to him in a way he would understand. "That's like..." It struck her how little she actually knew about the social constructs of dragons. "It's something that a dragon would do for its hatchlings. Or its mate."

Hiccup's brows raised at that. "Do you have a mate?"

The furious blush in her cheeks didn't slake. Her eyes scanned the ground for her axe, and once she spotted it, she drew it close. She didn't want to reply. There was a sore little squeeze in her chest whenever she talked about marriage or the future, and she wasn't sure that she was ready to reveal something so intimate to the wild thing yet. But because he asked, she answered. She wrung her hands in her lap.

"Yeah. I'm getting married."

!

That night, she snuck into the kill ring with another basket of fish and the jar of poultice Hiccup had mixed up. Her hands shook violently, and her mouth felt dry as dust. She'd left her axe at the door. It'd felt like removing her own arm to leave it behind.

Murmuring to herself to try and snuff out the fear, she stalked under the cobwebbed shadows of the arena's dome. One of the dragons was awake- she could hear it pacing and hissing inside its cage, but thankfully, it wasn't the Nadder. Astrid set down the jar and the basket by the door's lever. Then, wrapping her sweaty hands around the heavy steel bar, she grunted and shoved it down. The metal door clacked as it was drawn back, and she watched with a pounding heart as the bird-like dragon poked her head out of the shadows.

"It's- it's me," she whispered, praying that the creature wouldn't attack her on sight. She'd only stared at her the evening before, but Hiccup had been there to hold her in line. This time, she was on her own. "Remember me?"

Slowly, dragging the basket of fish along the stone floor, she stepped out from behind the lever so the Nadder could see her better. The dragon made a clicking chirp, tilting her head at Astrid, and

then her golden eyes moved to the basket. Just like she'd done for Toothless, the girl pushed the fish forward and kicked it over at her feet. At first, the Nadder just stared at her, wary and distrusting. She even made limping shuffles back into the cage.

"No, no," Astrid cringed, inching forward. She held her hands up so that the beast could see they were empty. Then she leaned over to pick up a fish, holding the slimy thing out. "Come here, girl. It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you."

When she didn't move, the Viking girl tossed the little fish inside the cave. To her surprise, the Nadder snatched the fish out of the air and swallowed it in one bite. Astrid nodded. "Okay. Okay, we can do that." She picked another good-sized fish from the pile and showed it to the dragon. When she threw it, the Nadder limped forward to catch it. "Good girl!"

At her praise, the Nadder shuffled back out of the shadows, sniffing at the little dinner. Astrid sighed with relief when the dragon began to eat on her own, though she still paused every few moments as if to check and see if the young woman still stood there. She made sure not to move and startle the thing as she ate.

"Good girl," she murmured, "good girl."

And that was the first night that Astrid thought maybe Hiccup could be right about everything.

!

5. Chapter 5

****Chapter Five.****

Usually when Astrid awoke to the blaring horn of the raid alarm in the middle of the night, the first thought to surface to her bleary mind was: "Protect the village." Ever since she could remember, even when she was a little girl and her parents would shove her towards safety. She would spend the run imagining the day her parents let her stay. Let her fight. She'd imagine swinging her axe with enough strength to take down a Gronkle, the speed of a Nightmare. The night she was finally placed on fire extinguishing duty, she thought she'd faint from the excitement of battle.

But for the first time in her life, a different thought rang louder than the deafening horn- _Hiccup._

She kicked the sheets from her bed and tangled her hair into a basic braid. Throwing on an easy tunic and her boots, she grabbed her axe from under her pillow and sprinted down the stairs. Her parents were just shaking awake, her father running half dressed from their bedroom. "See you out there!" she shouted over her shoulder, accidentally slamming the door closed behind her in her haste.

The village was still dark, which meant that the dragons hadn't had a chance to set anything ablaze yet. Astrid looked either way before sprinting towards the cliffs. Everywhere she looked, lights flickered to life inside windows, and villagers stumbled out of their houses with grim expressions. She made eye contact with a few and nodded

reassuringly.

"A Zippleback at Hoark's!" someone shouted.

"Get the children to Gothi's!" yelled another.

Astrid's eyes landed on a Gronkle swallowing a large boulder in one gulp. It leered around the village and then belched out a stream of lava in the direction of the nearest house. The creature missed, but the grass surrounding the little home caught fire, and smoke began to fill the air. It was sniffing out a close pile of rocks when she ran over, catching it across the face with the flat of her axe. With a shriek, the Gronkle shook its head and used its tiny wings to putter away.

A twinge of guilt vibrated like the strings of a lute in her chest. Her grip shifted on the handle of her weapon as she watched the dragon fly off to be a nuisance elsewhere, and she clenched her jaw. She'd just started to believe that maybe these beasts weren't attacking in a bloodthirsty rage, and she found herself disappointed to see them terrorizing the village. She decided she didn't want to hurt them, but she didn't think she was going to be given a choice.

"Astrid!"

She turned to see the Thorston twins jogging her way, trailed by Fishlegs and Snotlout. She couldn't say when exactly she'd become the leader of the little band of teenagers, but for years now, they'd always found her at the beginning of a raid, like troops reporting for orders. Blowing her bangs out of her eyes, she turned away from the sudden influx of dragons to speak to them.

"Hey, guys. Anything out of the ordinary yet?"

"Not unless you count Ruff's face," Tuffnut answered flatly. "Where do you need us?"

Astrid took a quick survey of the village, putting hours of tactical studies to use. "Fish, go lend Gobber some backup. We're going to be short on weapons this time around and he'll need help getting them out as soon as possible." Her gaze cut to the twins. "You guys head over to the pastures. Do what you can to keep the sheep in one place. They can't pick them off if they don't scatter. Snotlout-"

Her intended raised his eyebrows expectantly, resting his hammer on his shoulder. "Yeah, babe?"

Though she felt herself frown, she jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "You're with me. Try to keep kills down to a minimum."

The Viking gave her a curious look, but she didn't comment further. "Let's go."

As the group parted ways, Astrid couldn't help but be distracted by the dark wall of Snotlout's back. He wasted no time in diving into the thick of it, charging dragons with a fearless battle cry. It was one of the things she'd tried to find endearing in the early days of their engagement, when she'd hated her parents and the Jorgensons and for the first time in her life considered leaving Berk. She'd tried

to squint and pick out the redeeming qualities in the young man, and the way he ran into a fight without looking back was one of them.

After she'd observed, analyzed, and read him through like a worn copy of a strategy text, she'd come to the conclusion that for all of his faults and virtues, she held not a single spark of attraction for Snotlout. Hardly any affection at that. After a few months, her distaste for the young man melted into a faint indifference. Astrid set her sights on becoming the best warrior she could and studied Stoick the Vast from afar. She might have been paired into a loveless marriage with Berk's heir, but if she was going to be a chief's wife, she was going to be able to run the village backwards and forwards. It was the only thought that kept her from crumpling in on herself in the dark of night, when she thought about her future and it felt so bleak.

Someone ran by her, accidentally crashing into her shoulder, and the motion jerked her from her thoughts. Astrid shook off the weight and surged forward, coughing against the rising scent of smoke and Zippleback gas. All around her, villagers worked to fend off the dragons. For the first time in her life, she was more concerned by the attacks of her own people. Every time she swung her axe, she felt herself holding back, keeping her blows just out of reach. An inhuman scream went up from deeper in the village, distracting her just long enough for a Nadder to fling her to the ground.

"Ah!" The breath was smacked out of her like a hammer to the back. With a grunt and a glare, she scrambled back to her feet, her eyes scanning the ground for her axe.

The dragon began to slowly approach. Its pupils were dilated, its advance low and predatory. She noticed her weapon, flung behind the beast and out of reach. She could make a dive for it, but she'd need a distraction first. It cocked its head at her, reminding her of the dragon from the kill ring.

Astrid exhaled shakily, holding her hands out in front of her. "It's okay," she mumbled, though the Nadder probably couldn't even hear her. "I'm a friend." Despite the way she watched with wariness, she tried to summon a sweet tone to her voice. "You don't want to eat me. You're being bossed around by someone else."

The dragon seemed to hesitate, narrowing its gaze at her.

In a moment of pure madness, she crouched low to the ground and slid her foot back. It was the way Hiccup had crawled towards her that first time in the woods, the strange little sidestep that exposed her unprotected torso. "Is this what you want?" Somebody shouted nearby, as if in pain. "I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me."

Shaking its head, the magenta-colored Nadder looked her up and down. Its pupils kept widening and contracting into slits, and its wings twitched as if it was trying to get something off its back. When it gave a loud squawk, Astrid jumped, but she forced an uneasy smile on her face.

"Yeah. I'm not gonna hurt you. See?" Wetting her lips, she tried not to let her gaze move to the axe on the ground. Instead, she held out one trembling hand in front of her.

That was when she heard the spark of a Zippleback lighting its gas, and a sudden explosion rocked the island. The Nadder shrieked, seeming to snap out of the lull that Astrid had drawn it into, and it snapped at her outstretched hand with razor sharp teeth.

"Dammit!" she swore, forced to use the opportunity to leap for her axe. Her wrist twisted with pain as she employed a handspring to regain her footing, but she only grit her teeth against the ache. The weight of the axe felt heavier, and she had to use a two-handed grip to hold it erect.

She was just about to attack when she saw a shadow darting over the roof of the house behind her. Her heart plummeting to her stomach, she watched as the wild thing from the woods pounced onto the Nadder, hissing viciously. Hiccup had donned his leather gloves and his dragon mask again, making it difficult to tell whether he was a man or a beast. Two-sided staff in hand, he barred the weapon in front of the dragon's throat. It struggled in his headlock for a moment and then shook free, giving them an angry screech before flying off into the night.

Astrid ran to him, knotting her fingers in his furs and jerking him into the shadows. "Go back," she snarled, pointing a finger towards the treeline. "Get out of here." There was no telling who had seen the dragon man crawling on the rooftops, or wrestling with the Nadder.

He didn't remove his mask, which still bore the mark left by her hatchet, but she could feel him giving her a rebellious glare. "No. I know how to communicate with them. I'll calm them down and get one to take me to the nest."

"It's too chaotic!" Someone ran by, and she pulled him further into the darkness, adrenaline coursing through her system. "I've already tried. There's too much going on. It distracts them."

"No offense," he told her with a shrug, his voice echoing strangely off of his mask, "but I think I'm a little more effective at this than you."

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Effective, you may be. But inconspicuous, you're not. _Look at yourself_." Grabbing one of the horns sprouting from the forehead of the mask, she gave it a shake. "If anybody sees these they'll put a spear through you no questions asked. Best case scenario, they'll think you summoned the dragons here and arrest you. Assuming they let you live."

"I can't sit back and do nothing! People are getting hurt!" He gestured in the general direction of what lay beyond the shadows. "Everybody's focused on fighting. This is my one chance to find the queen!"

"It's not!" She stepped closer, feeling the tickle of his furs against her shoulders. "Go back to the cove. The dragons will leave- they always do- and we'll get Toothless back in the air. Then you can go." It was so strange speaking to a pair of painted eyes, but she knew that his real ones glittered at her with intensity. "This isn't our first raid."

He sighed with exasperation but went slack against her hold. "Fine. But I'm not going to the cove. I'll keep out of sight and watch over you."

That roused an entirely new sort of objections in her.

"I don't need to be watched!" she growled, careful to keep her voice low and not draw attention to them. "I've been doing this since I was a kid."

"That Nadder was about to strike," he snapped. "And you're hurt."

Astrid's wrist throbbed. "I'm fine. I'll only be distracted with you here."

"Then pretend I'm at the cove." Breaking from her grip, he held up his arms in a 'What can you do?' gesture. Before she could spit a retort at him, he fell to all fours and bounded out from behind the little house. When Astrid ran to look for him, he was gone, like he'd simply evaporated into the smoke.

She muttered a curse under her breath and stomped her foot like a child. "Watch me," she repeated with disgust, switching her axe to her good hand. Turning back to the action, she fumed. "He'd better watch himself."

!

"Yeh'll need to be easy on this for a few days," Phlegma the Fierce told Astrid as she wrapped the girl's wrist in stiff linen bandages. The Great Hall was spattered with Vikings, some tending to injuries, some ending their long night with a hard drink. Dawn couldn't have been far away, and Astrid knew that the village would have a late start because of the raid. Her wrist gave a twinge as Phlegma tucked in the tail of her bandage.

"Got it," the girl nodded, more than experienced with sprains. "Thanks." Her parents had gone back to bed as soon as the dragons left, but Astrid needed someone to wrap her injury. And she wanted to be where most of the people were, to see if she could overhear any whispers of wild man sightings. "Do you know if the dragons got away with much?"

"Nae, not as much as last time," the older woman beckoned over another Viking waiting to be patched up. "But they stayed longer. Thought it'd never end."

"Yeah." Astrid swung her legs over the side of the bench-like seating and stood. "I know."

With another word of thanks, she held her hand to her chest and crossed the room. Her ears were perked as she listened intently, but most everybody seemed to be retelling stories of personal heroics. Nobody seemed to have seen the boy she knew had lurked in the trees and rooftops. She wondered if he lingered outside still. Fixing herself a mug of sweet mead, she sighed and surveyed the grand room.

Her eyes fell on Stoick the Vast, who drank alone by the fire.

Usually following a raid was a sense of victory, a village-wide sigh of relief that they'd made it out without any significant losses. But the chief stared into the fire and raised his mug to his lips with a solemnity to match his name. Sometimes Gobber joined him, one of the only Vikings capable of drawing a smile from the intimidating Viking, but tonight his right-hand man was nowhere to be seen. Astrid hesitated, and then approached the fire with a swallow. She pulled up a chair and sat a few feet from Stoick.

"Hey, chief," she greeted. Her attempt at cheeriness had fallen flat because of the exhaustion in her voice. Clearing her throat, she nodded towards his arm, which she could now tell was bleeding from what looked like a bite mark. "Are you gonna have Gothi clean that?"

"Hmm?" Stoick glanced down at his arm with less interest than Astrid had for her mother's cookbook. "Ah. It's fine."

Berk's chief was an enormous bear of a man, with rich ginger hair and a thick beard streaked with silver. He shadowed over even the tallest and broadest of Vikings, though the impression of sheer largeness he gave off had as much to do with his inexpressive personality as it did his physique. She'd seen Stoick's smile a few times, and his even rarer laughter, but for the most part, the chief was quiet and hard. Astrid knew from village whispers that dragons had killed his family. He never remarried, and all of his time and energy went into running Berk. Nobody hated dragons like Stoick the Vast.

Somehow, his tragic losses aside, she had always thought she related to the man.

"So," the chief began with a swallow of something stronger than what was in Astrid's cup. "Have yeh been preparing for the wedding?"

The girl looked down at the drink in her hand, scraping her thumbnail across the splintering lip of the worn mug. "I guess. My mom's been busy."

Stoick nodded, not tearing his eyes from the fire. "Snotlout's a good man. But he'll be a better chief with yeh by his side."

Suddenly she regretted taking a seat next to him. Ever since Hiccup had asked her about her "mate", she'd felt like the news of the engagement had ripped her open all over again. It was something she didn't talk about unless forced, and she'd caused her intended enough physical pain that he knew better than to try and act like a husband to her. Except for the occasional mention of the impending spring wedding, Astrid's family and friends hardly discussed the marriage at all.

Her thoughts moved unbidden to the way Hiccup had invaded her personal space. He'd been so close she could hear the breeze of breathing in his lungs, and he could likely hear the pounding of her heart. The way he'd touched her hair- she'd told him it was for mothers and mates. Glancing into her mug, she lifted her bad hand to her haphazard braid and brushed her fingertips over the silky strands. She wondered absently what his felt like- if his was as soft as hers or as rough as his manners. But she was neither his mother nor his mate. She doubted she'd get the chance to find out.

"We don't get ta choose our destinies."

Astrid was torn from her thoughts by the chief's cryptic words. She glanced up, but his expression hadn't changed. "That's what makes it a destiny, isn't it?"

The corner of his mouth twitched upwards. "Aye." Taking a long draw from his mug, he hissed and grimaced at the heat of his drink. "Ignore a drunk man's ramblings."

Her hand lowered from her hair and rested against her chest. She'd need to ice it when she got home- it was throbbing. "You meant- we don't always like our destinies."

"S'pose so."

The two sat in silence for a long time after that. Eventually Astrid's eyelids grew heavy. She finished her drink. The fire was warm and the mead sweetened her tongue. But she knew she had things to do and promises to keep, so she pushed back her chair and stood. Without another word to Stoick the Vast, she left her mug on the table and quit the Great Hall.

The girl felt eyes follow her all the way back to her house.

!

Berk spent the morning mending the damage that the dragons had wrought. There was so much to be done, so many roofs to patch and fences to rebuild. The sun had already been up for a while when the exhausted Vikings dragged themselves from their homes. Despite the air of success that had permeated the little island in the aftermath of the raid, the gray and drizzly morning reeked with disgruntlement and unhappiness.

Astrid had laid tangled in her sheets long after her parents departed to repair a neighbor's house. It took an inordinate amount of strength to drag her aching body from the bed and dress herself. Her sprained wrist limited her braid options, so the resulting hairstyle was lopsided and frizzy. She found herself uncaring. There was supposed to be a point to everything they did, she was sure. But discovering her village in the midst of a century old cycle, worse for wear and in the fading delusion of victory, the girl found herself lacking the motivation to step outside her door.

Something stabbed at her breast, and she wrinkled her nose at the nuisance. Digging beneath her shirt and bindings, she withdrew a folded piece of parchment. She pursed her lips and smoothed out the little drawing. A poorly scribbled tailfin. One to match that of a Night Fury in the forest.

Astrid took a slow breath and shoved the paper back into her shirt, nestling the sketch right against her heart. Tugging on her boots and slipping a knife into her belt, she pushed out the door with a renewed sense of purpose. A misty rain tinkled against her metal shoulder pads and dampened her cheeks with beads of moisture as she walked. One drop was threatening to tip over her nose when she barged into the forge and fixed her eyes on Fishlegs.

"I need to know if I can trust you." She used the back of her

bandaged hand to wipe the rain from her forehead. "I need your help."

6. Chapter 6

****Chapter Six.****

"Why am I getting the distinct impression that this sense of utter dread is only going to increase from here on out?"

Astrid gave Fishlegs a withering glance over her shoulder, ducking out of the way of a threatening branch. Twigs and leaves crunched under her boots as she led the young Viking through the forest, armed with another list from Gothi and less incentive to finish this one. She'd stolen the boy from the forge under the ruse that she needed help identifying items on the parchment. Fishlegs had just gulped and nodded, letting the girl lead him into the damp, misty forest.

"I'm going to infer from your silence that my theory's accurate."

She pulled up short, making him almost crash into her. Blonde braid whipping his shoulder, she whirled on him. "Can you handle this?" she snapped. Ensuring that her glare would communicate her seriousness, she scowled. "This isn't something you can run away from or let slip. We're not kids anymore- this is lives at stake right now."

Fishlegs' eyes, if possible widened. "_Lives_ at stake? You're quietly and mysteriously leading me through the creepy woods for something _life or death_?"

"Yes." Her fingers flexed, missing the handle of her axe. It was strapped to her back, but she'd had no need to draw it. Just the desire to feel the comforting weight in her grip. "I won't be mad if you want to turn around. But you have to tell me now. Can you keep it together and keep it a secret? Or not?"

He gaped for a moment, his gaze seemingly searching her face for some hint of teasing or of what lay hiding in the forest. When he didn't find whatever it was he was looking for, he closed his mouth and nodded, furrowing his brow.

"Good." She turned back towards the cove and continued trudging on. The drizzly rain hadn't stopped, but the treetops provided a little cover. Occasional fat drops would drip onto her shoulder or hair, feeling like someone tapping for attention. It set her on edge, even though she knew it was ridiculous for her to feel anxious. For possibly the first time in forever, the only danger to her in that forest was Fishlegs.

"So this isn't a secret you could just, you know, _tell _me?" He was struggling to keep up with her pace- she could tell by his heavy breaths and clumsy steps. It would've been useless trying to bring him along on a hunt- every creature within a five mile radius could likely hear him ambling behind her.

"I could," she answered thoughtfully as they began to approach the cove. "But I think you'll be less likely to freak out if I show you first." And then, after a moment of playing out the scene in her

mind, she added, "Though, if you do freak out, it'll be a lot easier to contain you."

"Contain me?"

"If necessary."

Astrid felt the beginnings of amusement trying to curl in her chest, but the stress of revealing what felt like a betrayal of Berk was like a boulder smothering the lighter emotion. A strange piece of her was aching to reach the wild boy's hide out, to see Toothless' dumb grin and be reminded why she was doing what she was doing. She wished she could predict how Legs would react.

"It's down here," she mumbled as they ducked under the stone overpass leading down to the mouth of the cove. It was a tight fit- the young Viking's breathing echoed nervously off of the claustrophobic black walls. But then she was leading him out of the little cave to the rock face. Her eyes searched the ground below before falling on one of the trees on the far side of the clearing. In it, she could see a brief flash of bronze, and one giant dragon hanging from a branch like a bat.

She glanced over her shoulder at Fishlegs, who was preoccupied by the prospect of taking on the steep climb. Then she took a deep breath, put her fingers between her lips, and whistled loud.

Fishlegs jumped at her side. And across the cove, Toothless unwrapped his wings and flopped gracefully to the ground. The Night Fury started bounding her way, and it didn't take long at all for the motion to catch the eye of the boy next to her. He screamed and pointed.

"Night- Night Fury!"

Astrid grabbed his tunic to keep him from stumbling backwards. Below, the dragon leapt onto a series of boulders and looked up at the pair with a curious head tilt. Then she heard Hiccup call her name.

"Astrid!" Her eyes tore from Toothless back to the tree he'd been hanging from. Hiccup fell out of the branches with a similarly strange grace and made his bizarre run-crawl their way. His face was split into a huge grin, despite the way Fishlegs was pulling and trying to back away. "Who's that with you?"

Legs gaped at her when the feral boy said her name, and he began stammering without any seemingly coherent sentences planned. His eyes kept going from her to Hiccup to the dragon and back.

She tried to give Hiccup a smile, raising her bandaged hand at him with a little wave. Then she turned to the young man at her side. "You said you could handle this. Time to prove it- come on." With as much of a yank as she could muster from her left arm, she tugged him forward to the lip of the cove.

"Is that really a Night Fury?" he squeaked, lagging behind as Astrid started her descent down the wall.

Her sprained wrist protested sharply, but she grit her teeth and

ignored it. "Get down here and find out."

Her foot reached blindly for the next crack in the rock face, and when she managed to slip her boot into the tiny ledge, she lowered herself down another couple of feet. Looking over her shoulder, she could tell that she was still too far to jump. She attempted another step down, but suddenly her foothold crackled and gave way. Any other day, her arms would have been more than strong enough to compensate, but when her injury was forced to abruptly support her weight, she gave a shriek of pain and lost her grip.

Astrid heard Fishlegs gasp her name, and she tried to get her legs under her so that she could brace herself for a jarring impact. But then she felt warm, scaly skin slamming against her, and a pair of short black legs wrapped around her shoulders and thighs. Even in the breath that she was falling, she could feel a strong heartbeat pound between her shoulder blades. And then they crashed to the ground. The breath was knocked out of her, but not a single inch of her was hurt.

"Nice catch, bud!" Hiccup's voice was muffled from outside the safe cocoon of the dragon's wings, and Astrid blinked in amazement at the smoothness pressed against her cheek. Her hand moved to feel the texture against her fingertip, but just before she touched it, the wing was pulled back.

She found herself face to face with Hiccup. He was- as always- just inches away, and despite the smile on his lips, there was concern in his eyes. "While I do find that's a faster route, I'm going to have to suggest taking the long way around next time."

Her answering expression was level, her rapid pulse still roaring in her ears. Still, she accepted the hand of help extended to her and untangled herself from the Night Fury's embrace. "Thanks, Toothless," she mumbled as the dragon twisted upright. She hesitated, but then reached down and gave his nose a little rub. His gummy smile of pleasure made the corner of her mouth tilt upwards.

Then she realized Hiccup still held her good hand, and she yanked it back with a blush.

"Um." Astrid shook her head, brushing the tingling sensation off on her skirt. Her eyes cut to the side to look for Fishlegs, who was clumsily making his way down the rock face.

"I'm coming, Astrid!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She rolled her eyes and held her throbbing wrist to her chest. "Yeah, I'm fine." Gesturing to the young man climbing down the rocks, she told Hiccup, "This is Fishlegs."

The Viking in question dropped the last few feet, landing on his backside with a grunt and a thud. Scrambling to his feet, he ran over to Astrid, but pulled up short when he noticed Toothless' eyes on him. His hands went up as if he expected the dragon to attack. "I am equal parts incredibly confused and extremely scared."

Hiccup circled the blonde man curiously. Then he grinned and gave Fishlegs a strange series of bobbing nods. "I'm Hiccup."

Astrid narrowed her gaze at the panic on the Viking's face. "Fishlegs works in the forge," she told the wild boy. "He can help us with Toothless' tailfin." Then to the taller young man, she said, "Hiccup can communicate with dragons. He's going to try and save Berk."

"And the Night Fury?" Fishlegs gulped.

The feral man gestured towards the dragon in question with a little fanfare. "This is Toothless."

Astrid put her hands on her hips and tilted her head toward Toothless. "We need your help getting him back in the air."

That's when Fishlegs showed a flash of the Viking in him. "So he can go back to blowing up our stuff during raids?" he asked warily, eyeing the Night Fury with suspicion.

Hiccup and Astrid exchanged glances, and the wild boy settled in a crouch next to Toothless. He gave him indulgent scratches under the chin and made little chuffing noises against his forehead. It wasn't long until the deadly dragon had his eyes rolled back and his tongue lolling to one side. Even the girl's heart melted a little at the sight.

"How are you doing that?" Legs wondered aloud, a little awe in his voice. He knelt down on one knee, fascination clearly making its way across his features. "How did you even get him to land? Nobody's ever seen a Night Fury out of flight. And never during the daytime."

Hiccup crawled around Toothless' side, smoothing his palms down his tail until he reached the tip. He held up the dragon's injury for Fishlegs to see. "He and I collided, and I think the crash landing took off his tailfin."

"Wow," Legs breathed. "So he's-"

"Grounded," Hiccup finished, dodging the testy little snap Toothless gave his hands. "For the time being."

Astrid reached inside her shirt and retrieved the little sketch they'd worked on the day before. It hadn't felt strange to hide the little piece of parchment there when it was just Hiccup around, but with Fishlegs standing right there, she forced back a blush. "This is what we had in mind," she began, not looking up at him. Unfolding the drawing, she held it out for him to see. "Hiccup knows a ton about dragon anatomy and aerodynamics, but not the calculations or the craftsmanship that we'd need to make a prosthesis. That's where you come in."

Fishlegs stood again and hesitated, his eyes on the sketch. "I'm not... We're fixing a dragon? To save Berk?"

"It's a little bit of a process." She winced, understanding his apprehension. Even she wasn't a hundred percent sure that Hiccup would be able to end the war like he said he could. "We'll explain everything we can. I just need your word that nobody else will find out about this. About them."

The Viking's gaze went back to Toothless. He was clearly interested in the possibility of learning more about this extremely rare species, but would his curiosity be enough to protect them from his own loyalty to Berk? He swallowed, and then he pointed at the parchment. "Can- Can I see that?"

Astrid handed over the drawing without a word. It was just a rough draft, covered in scribbles and little notes that she and Hiccup had discussed. It would be a miracle if Fishlegs could decipher any of it, much less put it to use. He lined up the sketch with Toothless' asymmetrical tail and squinted in concentration. She held her breath as he inspected it, wondering if she should have been more threatening. Fishlegs normally responded well to intimidation. Maybe she should've pulled out her axe.

"The weight from all these rods," the Viking said with a shake of his head. "It'd be too much on the tip of his tail. Probably throw off his balance, if not cause long term damage to the spinal cord."

Hiccup nodded thoughtfully. "I thought about that too. We couldn't try and hollow them out, take out some of the weight?"

"Not with this thickness," Fishlegs answered. "I don't have the skill for that, and I'm not sure that we've got tools for that precision."

Hiccup sighed, and Astrid watched in silence as the two young men began discussing alternatives for the prosthetic fin. She eventually settled down on the ground, realizing that she had very little to contribute to their conversation, and absently rubbed her wrist. She'd need to ice it once they got back. Toothless rolled onto his back next to her, tilting his head and examining her with intelligent eyes. It would never cease to amaze her how easily she could see the expression in them.

She listened to the two trade theories and information. Despite her initial nerves, it was obvious that the dragon-obsessed Viking would get along well with the dragon-raised man. As they poured over the little drawing, Fishlegs produced a piece of charcoal and began sketching a new design. Every now and then, Hiccup would steal the parchment and scribble something down with excitement. His hands and shoulders bounced with eager enthusiasm as he spoke, and the motions were faintly amusing.

"The problem is, anything we used to mimic the right fin's movement would need something on the other side to measure those actions and then respond with reactions. The whole thing would just be too much bulk."

"What if we just used a left fin, and then designed it for a rider to be able to control?"

"A rider?"

"Yeah. Me and Toothless, as a team. He controls the right fin, I control the left."

Toothless had been trying to slowly nuzzle his head onto Astrid's lap, and she'd been letting him creep his way up, but at the sound of

his name, the dragon snapped to attention. As if he'd been caught. Hiccup just gave him a distracted little pat and continued fleshing out details with Fishlegs. Settling back down, Toothless set his chin down on her knee. The weight was heavy, but warm.

There was a strange, tickling feeling in Astrid's chest. One that curled upward into her throat and made her head buzz. And it took her a minute to identify it, but after watching the earnest grin on Hiccup's handsome face, the word came to her: hope.

!

"Doesn't that feel much better?" Astrid whispered to the Nadder with a smile. Listening with pleasure as the dragon ate from the open basket of fish she'd brought, she dabbed at the dried blood on her scaly legs with a warm cloth. In the pale light from the candle she'd brought, she could see the pink, healing flesh trying to grow new scales. What had been nasty, deep wounds before Hiccup got to her were now shallow scabs surrounded by soft, smooth skin.

The Nadder gave a chirp, lifting her head from the basket to nudge Astrid's shoulder before burying her face back into the fish. With a little laugh, the girl dipped the rag back into the water she'd brought and continued her job. The bird like dragon seemed to adore the feeling, and so once she'd finished with her injuries, Astrid moved on to her tail. She took great care in not pricking herself on the Nadder's poisonous spines as she moved the cloth between them. Absently, she wondered how quickly the poison took effect.

"Would not want to be on the receiving end of one of these," she muttered, blotting the rag over scaly skin. "Promise you'll hold on to 'em when I'm around, okay?"

The Nadder made a little noise, but it didn't seem to be in response to Astrid's question. She'd reached the bottom of the basket, and knocked it over so that the fish at the very bottom spilled out. After she'd swallowed the last of her treats, she turned to Astrid. The motion pulled her tail from the girl's hands, making her jump and pull her fingers away from the dangerous tips, but she was quickly distracted by the dragon nuzzling her horn into her hair.

"Okay, okay," the Viking girl giggled, "I like you too." When Astrid began washing what was probably weeks of dust and grime off of the Nadder's snout and horn, the dragon made a little purring sound. Her breath smelled of fish, but the blonde didn't mind so much.

The sound of voices echoing nearby suddenly made her ears perk, and Astrid's blood ran cold. The dragon looked up at the dome, seeming to search for the source, but Astrid was on her feet as quickly as possible. She blew out the candle, bathing them in dark shadows, and tugged the Nadder inside her cage. Her heart thudded against her ribs.

"C'mon!" she whispered, her pulse skipping in panic. She pulled at the dragon's horn, terrified that she'd make a noise and draw the attention of the Vikings nearby, but luckily the Nadder stayed quiet. She let Astrid lead her back inside the little cell, and when the human tightly pressed herself into the back corner, the dragon followed.

It was long, painful few minutes as the voices came closer. They were loud and unfamiliar as the Vikings passed over the bridge. There was no telling what would happen if they glanced into the ring and noticed that the door to one of the dragon prisons was wide open. And then, thankfully, they grew fainter. Before long, they were gone. After a few minutes of trying to hold her breath, Astrid let herself gasp for air and slide to her knees.

Her eyes fell shut. The Nadder nudged her with concern.

"It's okay," she murmured, lifting a trembling hand to the dragon's scaly cheek. "They're gone. They're not going to hurt you."

Then, with a sigh of relief, she let her head fall back. _Or me_.

!

The following day wasn't as wet or rainy, but it seemed twice as cold. The Viking girl and her wild boy were huddled together around Toothless' warmth, sharing the small basket of food that Astrid had been able to sneak piece by piece from the dinner table. She only picked, content to watch the way the young man ate with wide, excited eyes. His fingers picked at the basket with dirty, greedy fingers, but it didn't bother her like it would have a week ago. If there had been more food to steal away, she would have taken it.

"Hey, Hiccup." She chewed on a piece of bread, her tongue searching out the kernels and seeds getting trapped in her teeth.

He gave her one of those silent nods that said he was listening, but didn't look up.

"You never explained how you got here. I mean, if you weren't flying Toothless, what _were_ you flying?" The question had perplexed her for a while now, but it kept slipping her mind whenever she was around. Now that Fishlegs had been added to their little secret circle, she found herself saving certain things for when she and Hiccup were alone. It was a new development.

"A Hobblegrunt," he answered through a full mouth. "I took one of the dragons I don't usually fly so it'd take my mom longer to notice I was missing. I told him to go back once I decided to stay with Toothless." His hand gave the sleeping Night Fury between them a scratch. "I'd kind of expected to be back by now, though. I was only coming to observe."

That spurred her curiosity on. "I meant to ask about your mom, too." Astrid tore another piece from her roll and slipped it between her lips. "Does she not know where you are? Is she going to look for you? What's her name?"

Hiccup sighed, glancing away from the food to look at the sky. His eyes roamed the gray clouds for a moment before shrugging. "Valka. I'm sure she knows I'm here. Though, she was gone on a trip when I left. A rescue. She probably doesn't know how long I've been on Berk." Shaking his head, his brows gave a little jump. "It wasn't a secret that I wanted to come. I've been asking her about my dad more and more, and a couple of weeks ago, she just... shut down."

"Shut down?"

Toothless gave a snore.

"She didn't want me to ask about him. Or here." Hiccup's fingers went still for a moment, and his gaze turned to hers. "She... she doesn't think the Vikings will change. Can change." The way he was looking at her made nervous tingles dance in her throat, and not the pleasant kind. The kind that revealed her own concerns on the matter. "'People can't be changed,' she says."

"Do you think she'll come for you?" Astrid tried to imagine the woman that birthed such a strange young man. Valka. She was able to come up with about as clear of a picture as she could imagining his father. Which was none.

He shook his head. "Probably not, if I can get Toothless flying and get back to her. I think she's afraid to face the villagers. If it takes too much longer, though... If she thinks I'm in danger, I dunno." Shrugging, he went back to eating. "No telling."

"Hmm." Her brain was a whirl, trying to put together the tattered pieces of his past, of his family. She'd have to start asking around the village if Hiccup planned on getting any answers about his father. Though, she'd have to figure out a way to do it without raising any suspicions.

After a moment of quiet between them, she pressed a little further. "What kind of stuff did she tell you about him?"

"Not much." Hiccup let his head fall to the side. "He was an amazing warrior. Famous for killing dragons. They fought about it a lot, and when mom and I got dragged away by a Stormcutter, she just... decided not to go back to him." Scratching his scruffy beard, he quirked his mouth to the side. "I know Vikings are supposed to be violent and hostile and they hate the dragons, but..."

Astrid pursed her lips together. For some reason, she wanted to feel indignant, but she couldn't quite summon the emotion. "We're dying," she told him lowly. "We don't have a choice but to fight. You know that."

"I do." Hiccup nodded, and his hand reached out for her. Instead of pulling away from it, like she always did, she let him brush the back of his palm against her cheek. It was just a second of contact, as friendly as a pat on the shoulder, but still, hot sparks jumped to her skin. "And now I know she was wrong. People can change."

Blinking, Astrid turned her face and cut her eyes away from his optimistic expression. "Don't get ahead of yourself," she whispered, trying to stifle the heat she felt rising in her cheeks. "One flight, remember?"

"Right." He was grinning at her, even as he shoved another bite of fish and bread into his mouth. "One flight. Then you're mine."

Her head whipped back at his words, but he didn't seem to be paying attention anymore. Though she wanted to protest, to correct his strange answer, she found herself speechless. Clenching her jaw,

Astrid decided to let it drop. It wouldn't be the first time that the awkward young man had said something suggestive without knowing how it sounded.

So she kept silent. She petted the Night Fury at her feet. She watched Hiccup smile.

7. Chapter 7

****Chapter Seven.****

Astrid didn't recall falling asleep on the cool, spongy grass of the cove. Between mornings spent in training, afternoons spent doing chores, evenings spent with Hiccup and Toothless, and then sneaking in visits to the Nadder when all of Berk was asleep, the girl was running herself thin. Her load had become a little heavy, even by her standards. She'd always had a predictable sleep schedule- her head hit the pillow before midnight, and then she was up by the first rays of dawn. Never once in her life had it faltered.

Until a feral boy and his Night Fury crash landed into her world.

She hadn't even meant to close her eyes. Fishlegs and Hiccup had been crowding around Toothless' tail, checking the fit of some belts for his tailfin. Astrid was stretched out by the small lake a few feet away, and she'd reached for the fur cloak Hiccup had discarded several minutes earlier. She was a little chilly, so she'd pulled half of the cloak over her and tucked the other half under her head in a little pile. She'd almost expected it to smell gross, like a teenage boy who hadn't bathed in weeks. But the scent clinging to the furs was smoky and pleasant. Before she knew it, their voices were fading out, and she was dozing off.

She wasn't sure how long she slept, or even exactly where she was when she woke. Her brain felt bleary, and the comfort of her little cocoon was intoxicating, trying to tug her back under the waves of sleep. Her eyelids were so heavy. She could hardly hold them open.

"Fishlegs?" she heard Hiccup ask.

"Yeah?" she heard Fishlegs answer.

Astrid yawned into the furs and tried to stir, but her body felt like every limb was made of iron. Perhaps it wasn't such a terrible thing for her to steal a few more minutes of rest.

"Are you Astrid's mate?"

That, however, had the cobwebs clearing from her mind in a heartbeat. The girl froze, now having to force herself not to open her eyes. Her fingers snaked through the warm fur and pulled it back a bit so she could hear.

Fishlegs sounded as flabbergasted as she felt. "Her- her _what_? You-you- I'm not-"

"She said you guys don't use that word," Hiccup chuckled, his tone

colored with a hint of embarrassment. "The one she's getting married to." When Astrid dared to sneak a glance at the two, they were still leaning over Toothless, their backs to her. The belts had been set aside, though, and she thought she could see a measuring tape in Fishlegs' hands.

"N-no." The Viking shook his head vehemently. "That's Snotlout. Not me."

"Snotlout," Hiccup repeated, testing the name on his tongue like he did whenever Astrid taught him a new word or an unfamiliar phrase. He'd done that with a particularly unsavory swear she'd muttered the day before. "They're mates."

"Uh." She could practically hear Fishlegs' gulp from where she lay. "Sort of. They will be."

"Humans don't mate before getting married?"

The girl had never blushed harder in her life. Half of her wanted to untangle herself from the cloak, find Hiccup's staff, and bludgeon him to death with it. The other half was so mortified that she could only pull the furs over her face and pray that Fishlegs had the tact to put a swift end to the conversation. Unfortunately, though, the gods had stopped being on her side a long time ago.

"Er- no. The wedding is kind of a precursor to that. That certain event." At least in his defense, Fishlegs had the decency to sound uncomfortable. "It's a ceremony where the girl says she'll only- uh- mate with the guy, and he says he'll only mate with her. Until they die."

"Most dragons mate for life," Hiccup said thoughtfully. She could just picture his eyes lifted towards the sky as he filed away this new piece of knowledge.

"Really?" Gods, now even Fishlegs sounded fascinated.

"Yep."

What followed was the most painful, most awkward silence that Astrid had ever had the displeasure of experiencing. She wished that lightning would strike her dead. That she'd fall into the lake and drown. That Toothless would suddenly develop the munchies and swallow her whole. All she could think about was Hiccup and Fishlegs thinking about her and Snotlout... _mating._ She had to suppress the urge to shudder.

Then Hiccup spoke up again. "She doesn't like talking about her mate."

Astrid let her eyes fall closed and despite herself, tried to concentrate on the Viking's answer.

"I don't know if I'd know," Fishlegs admitted. "Astrid doesn't really get close to people. But she gets hostile when you bring up the wedding, yeah."

"Why?"

There was a shuffling noise as they shifted, and she wished she could see them. Decode their body language. There was something about the way her childhood friend had answered that made her uneasy in a way unlike the embarrassment of "mating" talk.

"I don't-" Fishlegs suddenly cut off then, and a dark twisting in Astrid's stomach told her she knew what he was about to confess. Her body tensed, aching to scramble out of the cloak and slam her hand over his mouth. This wasn't something she wanted Hiccup to know. This wasn't something she wanted anyone to talk about. "I don't think she _wants_ to marry Snotlout."

Her heart thudded with a dull ache. In her safe little cocoon, she scowled and dropped her gaze.

Then the wild boy asked, "So, why is she?"

It's the way things have to be, she urged Fishlegs to say. Her hands itched to cover her ears, because she was sure that she didn't want to hear whatever was about to be said next.

But the young man was silent. He didn't answer right away. In fact, he was quiet for a long time before he finally spoke again. "I'm not sure, honestly. Astrid's kind of an anomaly."

"An anomaly?" Hiccup's voice sounded confused, but was also tainted with a little bit of amusement.

"Different," Fishlegs explained. "She... She doesn't act like one of us."

The dull ache in her ribs was becoming a sharp pain.

"Astrid doesn't really hang out with the rest of our group. Like, she eats dinner with us, and she works with us during training and raids and stuff, but she doesn't go yak-tipping, she doesn't tell jokes, she doesn't take dares." Fishlegs paused, and she could hear him scratching his patchy facial hair. "She doesn't smile. She trains. Works. I don't think I've ever seen her do something just because it was fun. The closest I ever got to seeing her happy was when she was named first in dragon training. And even then, it was like... like it wasn't _enough_, you know?"

"She worries about the village," Hiccup told him. "I think she feels like it's her responsibility."

Astrid hoped her sharp exhale wasn't as loud as it felt. Her fingers tightened in her makeshift blanket. Her pulse was skipping, and she gnawed anxiously at her bottom lip.

"We all worry about Berk," Fishlegs half-whispered. Then louder- "When the dragons aren't attacking, everybody else kind of takes a step back. Breathes. Relaxes. I don't think Astrid ever relaxes."

They were quiet for a heartbeat. Hiccup murmured so low she could hardly hear, "She's sleeping."

"Correction- I don't think Astrid ever relaxed. Before."

"What do you mean?"

_What _do_ you mean, Legs?_

"I don't know. She seems to... _breathe _in here."

"Hmm."

Astrid closed her eyes, willing herself to fall back asleep. She didn't want to hear anymore. She wasn't meant to know what they thought about her, and the longer she listened, the more uncomfortable the throbbing in her chest became. She wished she could take a bucket with soap and scrub out the inside of her brain the same way she'd scrubbed down the Nadder's dirt and grime. That was what their words felt like- like mud that only spread the more she tried to wipe it away.

"Hey, Fishlegs?"

"Yeah?"

She squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as possible. She didn't want to hear.

"It's... bad... to dream about someone else's mate. Right?"

Astrid felt like she'd been punched in the gut. No matter how deeply she tried to inhale, she couldn't manage to catch her breath.

"It's..." Fishlegs sighed then. "It's an anomaly."

She feigned a loud yawn and rolled over, curling into herself. It had the effect she'd hoped for- they fell silent. And then when they spoke again, it was about the prosthesis. After a few moments, they were laughing and cutting up again, the conversation seemingly forgotten. She pulled back the fur from her face and stared across the surface of the lake. An anomaly. Her hand slid to her chest to feel her heart hammering against her palm. It took her a long time to feel normal again.

!

"Astrid Hofferson," her mother's stern voice cracked like a whip against her back, just before her fingertips brushed the doorknob leading out into the village.

The girl froze, exhaling through pursed lips before putting a smile on her face and turning. She was surprised her mother was still awake, because unless her parents joined other adults in the Great Hall for a drink, they were usually in bed long before Astrid snuck out. "Yes?"

The older woman crossed the living room into the kitchen, placing her hands on the back of a chair and motioning to the place across from it. "Sit. We need ta talk."

Lightning crackled down her spine, and she struggled to maintain a neutral expression. She was already formulating her cover story in her head, and she was glad she'd decided to bring her axe. It would

lend credence to her lie of late night training. But she did as she was told, stiffly approaching the table and falling ungracefully into the offered chair. She tried to seem more annoyed than guilty, as if her mother wanting to talk wasn't making her heart stutter and sputter.

The Viking woman didn't speak for a long, tense moment, her gaze a knifing glare. Her mother's arms were folded in front of her chest, her hair unbound and tied to the side for the night. People always said they thought Astrid and her mother looked just alike.

"I'm expecting yeh ta be honest with me," the matriarch began slowly. The longer she drew it out, the more anxious Astrid became. "If yeh lie ta me, I'll find out the truth soon enough."

The girl pressed her lips into a tight line. "Okay?"

In her brain, she was a flurry of panic, wondering in the back of her mind what she could do to get a message to Hiccup that he needed to run. She doubted he knew smoke signals. But the hard-headed boy probably wouldn't leave Toothless even if he knew a mob of angry Vikings was coming for him.

Her mother's fingers tightened on her arms. "Do I need ta talk ta Spitelout about moving the wedding up?"

Her words were as bracing as cold water being splashed in her face. "What? No!" The blonde sat up on the edge of her chair, her expression now as perturbed as her mother's. "Why would you do that?"

"Don't think I haven't noticed yer behavior," the older woman answered crisply. "Out at odd hours, oversleeping, eating more than twice your usual portions. Not ta mention the secrecy, the attitude. Remember- it's not something yeh can hide forever."

Astrid's eyes searched her mother's face. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to expect from a "talking to"- she hardly ever received them. But she was becoming less and less convinced that Hiccup and Toothless had been discovered. "If there's supposed to be some implication here, I'm missing it."

Mrs. Hofferson looked to the heavens and shook her head, and then exhaled with sharp exasperation. "Answer me truthfully, girl- have yeh been doing things with Snotlout that he should need ta take responsibility for?"

The accusation suddenly became very clear, and the realization sent Astrid to her feet. "You think I'm- Mother!" Her face felt hot with both indignation and relief.

The older woman seemed to soften a little, holding up her hands in a gesture for her to lower her voice. "I'm nae upset with yeh," she said in a hushed tone. "These things happen. I just need ta know if the wedding should be moved up ta avoid any wagging tongues."

"Well, they can wag all they want," Astrid hissed, aware that her father was probably listening in. "I haven't been with Snotlout and I'm most definitely not carrying his child." The thought made her a little dizzy actually- she protested so strongly, but that was the

fate already laid out for her. For all she knew it'd be a year or two before she'd be telling her family the opposite. She felt a little nauseous, but vomiting up her dinner would not be the way to assuage her mother's fears.

That just made a flash of anger cross the other woman's face. Astrid didn't understand the reaction, but then she asked, "If yeh haven't been with Snotlout, who have yeh been laying with?"

"Nobody!" Astrid insisted.

"You've been with the Ingermans' son a lot lately. Is it him?"

The girl snarled with aggravation. She threw her hands up and let them fall back to her sides. "Is there no talking to you? I haven't done anything!"

"It'd be a fine way ta get out of yer marriage contract," Mrs. Hofferson growled, eyeing her daughter with fresh suspicion. "Yer not dumb."

"Apparently you are, if you think I'm doing something like that." Faintly she wondered what her mother would be more appalled to discover- that Astrid had gotten herself pregnant by another man, or that she was hiding a Night Fury and a dragon-sympathizer in the cove. "I'm as untouched as the day you signed that contract for me, so I'm perfectly virginal and effectively trapped in this engagement. Just like you want me."

She pushed back the chair with a hostile clatter and started for the door, but her mother chased her around the table, grabbing her by her forearm. "Astrid," she pressed, the irritation on her face gone as quickly as it had come. "I'm sorry. Hear me? I'm sorry."

The girl wanted to yank back her arm and burn out of the house, but a sense of duty had her swallowing the urge. It didn't stop her from giving her mother a cutting glare though.

The woman lifted her hand to her daughter's cheek, pressing tender fingers to the side of her face. "I know this isn't what yeh want. Yeh've made it clear. But yeh weren't fancying anybody else, and after yer uncle-" Mrs. Hofferson shook her head and looked at her daughter imploringly. "This marriage would mean safety and security and opportunity. Not ta mention, yeh'd be-"

"Restoring our family's honor," Astrid finished for her, her voice just a little firmer than a whisper. "Be honest, Mother, is me marrying Snotlout just our way of getting out of Uncle Finn's shadow?"

Her expression crumpled. "He brought a shame ta our household," she answered. "I won't lie and say that yer marriage wouldn't ease that. We're lucky the boy chose yeh over the Thorston girl."

"Lucky?" Astrid scoffed. She disengaged herself from her mother, taking a step back towards the door. "Why does he get to choose? Why don't I?"

"Because he is going ta be chief." Her tone was taking on an edge again. "This is yer fate, Astrid- you are the one who should be

leading Berk next ta Snotlout. And yeh know that! All yer life, yeh came out ahead of the others. Yeh were not born ta be ordinary!"

She felt tears pricking her eyes. Glancing away, she wet her lips and shook her head. "I work hard. I train. I look after the village- I was first in my class in dragon training! Does being the best mean nothing if I still need a husband to be extraordinary?"

Her mother's eyes fell closed. She sighed. "Astrid, yeh know we're proud of yeh. We _are_, but-"

"Don't worry, Mom." The blonde turned for the door before she lost the control she'd held onto so well. "I'm not pregnant. I'm not with Fishlegs. The wedding will go according to plan."

And then before she could hear another word, she left the Hofferson house with a slamming door. For a moment, she had to stare up at the stars and catch her breath. Her body felt heavy. The wind chilled the side of her neck not covered by her braid. Her trembling hand came to rest beneath her ribs, to quell the riot in her. She took a slow, deep breath.

And then she ran.

Astrid used to have dreams where she could outrun the wind. Where her feet hardly touched the earth, and nothing could touch her. Arms pumping at her sides, she wished she were that fast now. She wished she didn't feel the weight of every step or see the flash of houses as they passed. She had to believe that if she pushed just a little harder, moved just a little lighter, a little quicker, she could ghost over the earth without having to be a part of it at all.

Her axe slammed against her back as she sprinted, knocking the breath from her with every stride. Hot tears melted down her cheeks, and she swiped them away with a desperate hope that she wouldn't run past anyone she knew. The burn in her chest was a familiar one, the kind she knew how to tame. Her wild heart raced as if it too could outrun the wind whipping past. When her boots found slick grass instead of Berk's beaten roads, she almost lost her balance. Astrid righted herself and ran for the woods.

She wasn't sure why she'd chosen that direction to run. The only thing beyond Berk was a downed dragon and a young man with expectations of his own. Though she pushed her legs to tear apart the space between her and the forest, the moment she reached the treeline, she anchored herself against a tree trunk and jerked to a stop. The bark was rough on her palms, and she stared into the dark of the woods as she panted. Slowly, not all at once, she let herself collapse against the tree. Sobs shook her, and Astrid let her head fall back as she cried.

We don't get to choose our destinies. That's what Stoick the Vast had told her. She balled her hand into a fist and weakly beat at the trunk. Her bangs stuck to her sweaty forehead. Straddling the line between her village and what lay beyond, she sat and cried and waited for the day when neither of them had a hold on her.

!

When, after her tears had dried and her pulse had settled, Astrid

finally gave in to the cold that had frozen her in place. It took a few tries to get her numb feet beneath her, and her fingers fumbled along the bark of the tree she'd been leaning against. She ached, both from the cold and from sitting on her knees for so long. Autumn still had a couple of months left before Winter struck, but just north of the Meridian of Misery was a frigid place to spend the fall. As she forced her stiff legs to wander back towards the village, she wondered if her fur coat would last another year.

She trudged forward, wrapping her arms around her. Licking her chapped lips, she looked down to check that the remainder of the Nadder's medicine was still safely secured to her belt. It'd what she'd been sneaking out to do before her mother caught her, and it still needed to be done. Though, feeling the sharp wind cut beneath her clothes, she wished she'd thought to bring a blanket for the dragon. Then it occurred to her that she couldn't leave it anyways. Someone would see in the morning.

Astrid sighed. Almost all of the lights in the village had been extinguished. As she approached the bridge for the kill ring, though, she noticed firelight still flickering in the forge up ahead. Wondering if it was Fishlegs, working on Toothless' tail, she stopped and headed that way. The warmth of the forge would be comfortable too. She'd take a moment to scrub some heat back into her fingers before checking on her Nadder.

To her surprise, though, it wasn't Fishlegs at the anvil, but Gobber. The Viking was humming to himself as he hammered away at a dull sword, a large mug of something strong resting nearby. He didn't notice her at first, but when she stepped further inside the forge, he looked up. "Ah, Astrid. Evenin'."

"Hey." She didn't linger in the doorway, eager to move from the biting cold. Settling against an open wall, she held out her hands toward the flames and watched him work. A small pile of weapons sat to the side, but she could also see a larger heap of scrap metal at his feet. Obviously he planned on working through the night. It wasn't surprising, as low as they were on weapons. She thought about her hatchet, still lost somewhere in the forest thanks to Hiccup.

"Cannae sleep?" Gobber broke the silence between them, raising bushy brows at her. His hammer-arm came down with a strong _clang_!

"Went for a walk," she lied, stretching and flexing her fingers. Pinpricks of pain were beginning to blossom at the tips and pinch further and further down her knuckles. It always hurts at first when life flows where death once lived. She'd read something like that somewhere. "Got cold, so I came in here."

"Well, yer welcome ta." Lifting the sword to the light, he squinted at flaws in the steel that only a trained eye could see. "Stoick has me workin' the dead shift, rebuildin' the armory."

"I'd help if I knew how," she told him with a shrug.

"Ah, even the apprentice I got ain't much good. Always findin' that boy workin' on other projects." Gobber laid the sword back against the anvil and continued beating it into submission.

Curious, Astrid let her eyes wander. She wondered if Fishlegs stored the Night Fury's prosthesis there in the forge. Would he be that careless? She made a note to ask him next time she saw him.

"Oh." The thought reminded her. "Did Legs talk to you about me helping out with the dragons?"

"Huh?" The Viking paused mid-swing to look at her, but then realization untwisted the confusion from his face. "Oh, aye. Have a death wish, do yeh?" His snicker was only half teasing, she thought.

"No." Rubbing her palms together, she blew some warmth into them. "You're busy. I've proved myself perfectly capable of handling myself. It makes sense that I help out." She gestured towards the pile of scraps, and prayed a quick thanks to the gods for the assistance. "Maybe then you wouldn't be up so late."

He shot her a withering look, but then returned to his work. "Alright, then. If yeh think yeh won't get eaten, I'll let yeh feed the beasts. Does that mean yeh'll also be in charge of muckin' out their cages?"

Astrid winced, but then quickly recovered. "Sure. How often?"

"Eh, we're pretty lax about feedin' em. Every couple of days, Stoick says. Then just clean 'em out when it starts ta get too rank." Gobber shrugged, as if it was no big deal, but Astrid's brows had furrowed into an appalled expression.

"That's..." She chose her words very carefully. "You don't think that's a little... inhumane?"

The blacksmith snorted without glancing up. "About as inhumane as gobbling up my foot, I'll tell yeh that! Those creatures don't feel nothin' but evil. Hunger and evil."

Her hands were flexing for a new reason now. Astrid knew she shouldn't press, that she should drop it and wait another day, but she thought about the Nadder trapped in the arena and clenched her jaw. "I think they're smarter than we give them credit for," she said slowly. She narrowed her gaze at her mentor, trying to measure his reaction.

His tongue searched his cheek as he shook his head. "Yer still young, lass. Haven't seen the worst of their destruction yet."

Gritting her teeth, she pulled away from the wall. "I've seen plenty," she protested. "But you don't think we've committed atrocities just as terrible to them?"

He hadn't seemed surprised at all by her questioning until she said that. Gobber pinned her with a look of incredulity and disbelief. "Yer not sympathizin' with 'em now, are yeh?"

"No," she quickly bit out. "I'm just making a point."

Then a strange smile broke over him, and he rolled his eyes, lifting the sword and inspecting it once more. "Now yer startin' ta sound like Valka."

It took all the self restraint she had not to stiffen at the name. She'd had trouble remembering the name Hiccup had confessed to her earlier that day while she was wondering on the subject. It'd been a concern of hers that she'd never be able to recall it. But as soon as it slipped past Gobber's lips, it struck her as clear as a bell. Valka. That was his mother's name.

"Who- who's Valka?" she pressed gently, afraid to seem too eager. Her pulse skipped with excitement and nervousness. It was the closest she'd gotten to finding out anything about Hiccup's father since she'd found out he was from Berk. A thrill wouldn't stop running the length of her spine.

The Viking's face suddenly fell, though. Astrid's brow lifted as his furrowed, and despair gripped her when he shook his head. "No one," he answered, his tone quiet and solemn. "No one alive anyways."

Astrid glanced away, worried that if he made eye contact with her he'd see her disappointment. She wracked her brain, trying to think of a way to steer the conversation back on track, a sensitive way to brooch the subject without seeming too greedy for information. It was a skill she knew she'd have to have as a chief's wife- tact- but that had never been her strong suit. Honey and the hatchet- that was what she stuck to.

But then she realized with a thudding heart that his reaction in itself was a clue. Gobber knew Valka. He thought she was dead. And the reminder her death had wiped the wry grin from his face in a breath's time.

She exhaled sharply, pressing her lips together. Had Gobber been married before? She'd never heard of him having a wife, but if he'd lost her when Hiccup was just a baby, then Astrid would have been a baby too. Of course she wouldn't have heard about her. When she looked back at the blacksmith, there was a new curiosity in her eyes. Gobber had the pieces of the puzzle, the broken link connecting Hiccup to Berk.

A sweat was breaking across her forehead, and she dragged the back of her hand across her face to wipe it away. She watched the Viking work. For tonight, she'd let it rest. But just for tonight.

8. Chapter 8

Shrugs and gestures towards M rating

Chapter Eight.

Astrid was startled awake by an explosive boom of thunder.

Her eyes shot open, her lips parting in a gasp that felt like frigid seawater to her searing lungs. The black of her room was suddenly split apart by a flash of lightning, but her pupils slipped in and out of focus, preventing her from really seeing anything. Sleet smacked against the roof. Letting her eyelids flutter closed, she tried to steady her breathing.

She felt too warm. Curling fingers of her dream beckoned at her tired body, but the sheer discomfort holding her so tightly kept her awake. Beneath a heavy layer of blankets, she felt a strange whimper escape her throat.

In her dream, she'd been naked. For reasons known only to the blurry logic of sleep, it hadn't struck her as strange or bothersome. She'd been stretched out on a patch of dewy grass, her hands extended high above her head to brush across a pile of soft furs. They were velvety under her fingertips, light and feathery against her knuckles. Then they started to shift beneath her touch. Grow. Rise.

Astrid pushed up on her elbows to watch wide-eyed as the furs took the shape of a beast, a wild creature that circled her with a predatory glare. Her heart beat against her ribcage with painful, jerking lurches, and deeper in her core, a twisting hunger began to unfurl. The beast moved with a strange and familiar grace, its gaze following the lines of her body. Beneath its inspection, her breath hitched, and she felt her skin grow warm.

It stopped, pacing at her feet. And then, with slow, lupine steps, the beast started up her legs. Dizzying desire squeezed her chest, and as it crawled higher up her body, the furs slid back, revealing a very human, very _male _body.

Shivering with anticipation, Astrid laid back and let him settle between her thighs. Hot skin blistered against hers, his chest brushing the peaks of her breasts with sharp, teasing friction. His mouth went to her jugular, tracing the vein with long, hot licks. She exhaled sharply, and his teeth scraped down her throat in response. Of their own accord, her hands reached to feel the faint lines of his ribs, the muscles in his back and shoulders. They slid higher as his mouth moved lower, lacing in bronze hair. When he nibbled at her collarbone, she gasped and arched towards the heated press of his torso.

Sensation consumed her. Rough and calloused palms caressed her twisting curves. Her blood throbbed sluggishly, a forbidden dampness melting through secret places. Wherever he touched sparked a shimmering electricity. She felt wanted. Hunted. Captured.

He'd reached between them, fingers sliding through wet warmth. Green eyes watched her face as her lips parted with panting need. He lowered into the crook of her neck, whispering into the shell of her ear. "One flight. Then you're mine."

Then the thunder crashed, tearing her from her dream. At first, Astrid could only attempt to settle her speeding pulse, her ragged breathing. But then she was reaching frantically beneath the heavy furs. She whimpered with frustration as she tried to untangle her legs from her sheets and the skirt of her nightgown, an urgency to relieve the painful heat between her thighs driving her mad. When the restricting knot of blankets refused to come free, she stifled a sob of want and pressed her fingers against the fabric concealing her sensitive mound.

She moaned quietly, biting her lip at the dulled friction. There was no hint of the time, of what could be happening outside her bedroom door. She only knew that fire seared her skin, and only the demanding pressure of her hands could put it out. Under the thick cover of

dark, she ached and writhed, burning with no sense of relief in sight.

And then there was a bang at her window.

She started, sitting up. At first, she expected to see a bright flicker of flame and hear the panic of villagers, but then the lightning flashed, and a human silhouette blackened her window. Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling the scream that poured from her. Then she recognized the slender frame, the animal-like way he hung from her roof.

"Hiccup," she breathed, adrenaline making her tremble. The sound of ice splattering against the house reminded her of the frigid temperatures outside, and she was suddenly ripping back the blankets. She almost stumbled to the floor in her attempt to hurry, and the young man outside gave another desperate rap at her window.

"Hiccup!" she hissed again when she pushed the glass open. Wind, terrible and cold, blustered into her room, and rain spat over the window pane. Goosebumps licked across her skin. "What are you doing?"

"F-funny meeting you here." The wild boy swung into the bedroom with grace, but landed on her floor in a dripping pile. As she rushed to pull the shutters closed, he slowly crawled away from her. She could hear his teeth chattering, and he moved with obvious shivers. "I'm s-sorry. I know I'm not- not supposed to-"

"You're soaked through!" she interrupted, kneeling next to him and taking him by the shoulders. From what she could see in the dim light, his skin was pale, and his lips were a terrifying shade of purple. "What happened to your cloak?" She knew for a fact that one side was oiled, specifically for keeping off the rain.

"Gave it to Toothless," he swallowed, one corner of his mouth sheepishly tilting upwards. "I can get away for c-cover. He can't."

"You idiot, he breathes fire." Astrid swept to her feet, padding across the floor to her trunk. The hinges gave a loud creak when she opened the lid, making her wince, but she ignored it and pulled various blankets and furs free. "I'm going to get a towel. Get out of those wet clothes and wrap yourself up in these."

She left the room on tiptoe, a thought niggling in the back of her mind that she should be ashamed for telling him to strip so easily. In the forefront, though, was her fear of him catching his death running around wet and freezing. This far north, getting caught in the rain this late in the season was dangerous. No matter her concern for propriety, that would lay on her conscience forever.

Trying not to think about the state of undress he was likely achieving, she silently moved downstairs and ghosted to the linen closet. Luckily there were plenty of clean things, so the disappearance of a couple of towels wouldn't be thought strange, and while she was at it, she grabbed one of her father's old tunics. It would swallow Hiccup, but it was better than having a naked man in her room.

In an abrupt moment of shock, she remembered that her hair was unbound, and her fingers lifted to the loose locks. For a heartbeat, she could only stand in her living room with her hand to her hair, reveling in the realization that her husband would no longer be the first person to see her that way. It made her stomach lurch in a strange, not altogether bad way. Astrid glanced down at her thin white nightgown, holding the towels tighter to her chest. She'd been taken aback by the sight of him at her window. There wasn't even a second to worry about her appearance, but now she was hot with embarrassment. Before returning upstairs, she gathered her thick waves to one side and quickly tied them into a quick plait.

When she slipped back through her bedroom door, she found Hiccup sitting in the center of the floor, two layers of fur wrapped around his hunched shoulders. His wet clothing sat in a dark pile next to him, a small ring of water dampening the wooden planks beneath. Thunder rumbled outside, and he glanced up at the sound of her entrance.

"Are you warming up?" she asked, shutting the door behind her.

"Could be warmer." There was still a tremor to his voice, and when she reached down to brush the back of her fingers across his forehead, his skin was like ice.

Astrid pursed her lips, dumping the little pile of fabric in her arms onto the bed. Picking out one of the towels, she moved to face him and dropped to her knees. "We need to get your body temperature back up," she mumbled, more for something to fill the silence than to actually make conversation. Wrapping the thickly woven fabric around her hands, she began rustling his hair, squeezing and wringing the rain away. Her fingers instantly stung from the cold, and she frowned with concern.

"I just need..." Hiccup trailed off as she dried his hair, and beneath her, he shifted. Then she was being wrapped in furs, chilly arms slipping around her waist and tugging her close. "This."

The blonde gasped, heat suddenly rushing to her cheeks. A flash of her dream suddenly came to her mind's eye, the furs wrapped around the body settling over hers. But that one had been hot and teasing. This one was frozen and trembling. Eyes wide, she tried not to think about her nightgown as the only layer between them. His chin came to rest on her shoulder, his legs wrapping around hers. The rain on his still-wet chest made the fabric of her shift stick to his skin. She swallowed.

"This isn't-" She started to speak up, but then stopped. It was the first time he'd asked for something from her, Astrid realized. The only other thing he'd ever requested was that she keep his presence a secret, that she not reveal Toothless. Not once had he asked for the food she brought him, the fish for his dragon, or even information on his father. Slowly, she let her arms settle loosely around his neck. He smelled clean, like the minerals of the earth.

Her heart must not have settled since before she'd woken up, she noticed. But it was easier now, not pounding in such an aching way. She tried to remember the last time someone... held her. Had it

been Snotlout? The time his warm hands almost sparked something akin to comfort on her back? Or was it her mother? Several months ago, when Astrid just barely escaped the belching flame of a Nightmare and her parents thought they'd almost lost her? She couldn't recall now. But she could say with surety that she'd never been held this way before.

She allowed the damp towel to fall from her fingers. Hiccup's breath steamed against her hair as they sat quietly. Before she knew it, she was letting her forehead drop to his neck, feeling the thrum of a pulse against her temple. When he'd arrived at her window, she'd been uncomfortably hot, tight and humming like a string stretched too far. But the coolness of his skin felt like a balm smoothing over her frayed nerves.

After a moment, she felt his thumbs brushing back and forth across the vertebrae of her lower back, and she shivered.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Didn't want to make you cold."

"I'm not," Astrid murmured against the scruffy column of his throat. There was a chill to his skin, but it was slowly dissipating, giving way to the warmth of her body. She shifted, rolling her legs out from under her and resting them over his knee. The change in position twisted her torso, which made her feel better about not wearing her breast bindings, and allowed her to rest closer against him. Once more she had to tell herself not to think about their state of dress.

His head tilted, burying his nose in her hair. Hiccup inhaled deeply—she could feel his chest rising with the deep breath. His rough beard scraped just below her earlobe, and the storm's lightning seemed to come into the room. It struck straight through the window and into the farthest parts of her. Grateful he couldn't see the way her teeth sank into her lower lip to bite back a sharp exhale, she felt her fingers delve in the damp tangle of his locks.

There were cold lips just barely skimming her throat, and for a moment Astrid feared that he'd either kiss her or consume her. And then a throbbing, familiar heat clenched between her thighs when his warm tongue slid over the curve sloped between her neck and shoulder. Her exhale twisted into a moan.

Her eyes shot open. She was on her feet in a moment, shoving him roughly and covering the newly slick spot with her hands. Hiccup fell backwards, and she shot a prayer of thanks to the gods for the furs that covered anything she might not want to see.

"Why did you do that?" she hissed, backing away from the naked young man. "Don't you ever do that to me!" She was too taken aback to remember to lower her voice.

In the dark of her bedroom, Hiccup fell into his usual crouch and blinked up with wide eyes full of confusion. "What did I do wrong?" When he began to crawl forward, head tilted and lowered, the furs fell back to expose more of his skin.

She spun around and thrust out a warning hand. "Frigga! Stop!" Her chest rose and fell with her panicked breaths. Her own gaze, now that she was turned from the boy, was terrified. "Put- Get the tunic off

the bed and put it on. _Now._" Blinking, she shook her head and attempted to gain some semblance of control as he rustled behind her. She felt suddenly naked, and she kept one palm clamped on the place where he'd licked her. Like a wound she needed to apply pressure to.

Her blood boiled, her skin simmered. Half of her wanted to scratch the skin of her neck raw. The other wanted to trace it with curious fingers and learn why the wet assault had sparked such an acute reaction in the pit of her stomach. _Relax_, she told herself sternly. _He doesn't understand._

Astrid felt the back of his knuckles brush against her palm, and it startled her. Stepping away from the soft touch, she looked back to Hiccup. "Don't touch me," she whispered, though she let him see that her glower had gone. "That shouldn't have happened."

"I'm sorry," he stammered, shaking his head. Leaning back on bent knees, she noticed that he'd risen from his normal defensive stance and stood awkwardly. As if he was self-conscious about being on all fours. His eyes kept glancing down towards the floor. "I did a mate thing, didn't I?"

"Yes." Now that he seemed to be keeping his distance, she wrapped her arms around herself. Choking down the nervous lump in her throat, she cut her gaze to the discarded furs on the floor. "You can use those to make a bed in the corner," she told him, trying to keep her voice level. Her chin jerked towards the empty spot by the window. "You need to be gone by morning. If you come near me while I sleep, I'll cut your hands off."

"I'm sorry," he apologized again, moving to pull the furs to the far side of the room. "You- Humans, you have so many _mate things_."

"It's okay," she breathed, not meeting his gaze. Once he lowered himself beneath the window and wrapped himself in the blankets again, she slowly eased onto her bed. Her legs slid beneath the sheets. "I shouldn't have yelled. You didn't know." She tried to tell herself that, that she should soften the harshness of her reaction. But all she could think of was the way the man from her dream had done the same thing to her. The way her body had responded had been the same too.

"Thank you. For letting me in." She couldn't see his expression now- he was too far away, and the room was too dim. But she could tell by the way he leaned against the wall, he was facing her. "And for warming me up."

Astrid let her eyes fall closed, lying back and pressing her palm against her forehead. She grimaced, thinking about the implications of his words- the little entendres he never seemed to notice. Unbidden, her mind wandered- had she warmed him? Like the way he'd set her body ablaze? Like _that_? She sighed and fisted her other hand in her pillow. "You're welcome. Go to sleep, Hiccup."

He breathed a little- like he had something more to say- but when she turned on her side and stared at the wall, he fell quiet.

It took her a long time to fall back asleep. Her muscles were tight

with stress and- she grit her teeth before she would admit it- arousal, and it caused a distracting buzzing all over that she couldn't quell. Every time she'd reach a level of calm, she'd hear Hiccup shift or sigh, and she'd bristle with the thought of his warm tongue tasting her skin all over again. She clamped her thighs together. She flexed and clenched her fingers. Nothing eased the hot pains of desire.

When sleep finally claimed her, it was light and fitful. She tossed and turned and dreamed of phantom hands and rough cheeks. Green eyes that matched the same shade of Hiccup's. The frustration made her want to sob, but she steeled herself and allowed her thoughts to drift in and out of consciousness. He never touched her while she slept, never even came near the bed. But a terrible, wicked part of her wished he would.

She wasn't sure when dawn came, but the sound of him moving around roused her. It was just a small number of little rustles- furs being pushed aside, wet clothes being gathered, the window creaking open. She'd fallen back to sleep as soon as she heard silence again.

Astrid continued to dream about him after he was gone.

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The raging storm that had sent Hiccup running from the cove to her window in the middle of the night gave way to beautifully blue skies and white, fluffy clouds. A welcome sight not seen in Berk for at least two weeks. When weak tendrils of sunshine reached into her room and brushed across her bed, Astrid squinted through exhausted eyes at the pretty view. Her throat felt dry and her limbs were heavy, but she sat up despite it.

Her eyes searched the room- for what she didn't know. They found the pile of furs Hiccup had slept in still by the window. There was a large wet spot on her floor where his things had lain. But somehow, that was all that remained of the bizarre night they'd shared. For some reason, she felt like there should have been more.

Nonetheless, she dressed and restyled her hair with something nicer. On a whim, she added an intricate little plait to her design before binding it tight with leather cord. She ran her fingers across the smooth maze of blonde with a pleased half-smile and slid her axe from under her pillow. The sight of sunlight should have made her excited for training, but her mind was already on other things. When she came downstairs, she was already thinking of how to apologize to Hiccup for her strange behavior.

A note pressed in the Hoffersons' door, though, had her pulling up short. It was scribbled in Fishlegs' sloppy hand.

Your order is ready for pick up at the forge. See you after lunch.

The tailfin was done.

****Chapter Nine.****

Astrid was running as soon as she slipped past the tree line and away from the village's sight. Despite herself, her lips had parted in a beaming smile of excitement, and she nearly forgot to pace herself as she sprinted through the forest.

She'd been restless all morning, speeding through her daily exercises with half her usual perfectionism. Then during her chores, she could feel herself bouncing with impatience, the exhaustion from her sleepless night having no effect on the energy that Fishlegs' note had lent her. In person, she was helping her mother wash and hang the laundry while it was sunny and dry. But in her mind, she was in the cove. Today, after two weeks of preparation, she'd finally see if their hard work would pay off.

"Hiccup!" she shouted as she passed through the stone cave leading to their hiding place. "It's done!" Any awkwardness she'd felt towards him over their uncomfortable evening had almost dissipated.

He was already running to meet her when she slid over the lip of the cove. Because of her wrist, they'd had to establish a system. She'd jump down to the highest rock. Carefully climb and stretch over to the next lowest. And then she'd take a deep breath and fall backwards into his waiting arms. That afternoon, she leaped with a little more enthusiasm than necessary, and he stumbled backwards with an, _"Oof!_" They both fell to the damp grass, Astrid laughing and Hiccup grinning in baffled delight.

"Hello to you, too," he chuckled. "I guess you're not mad at me?"

Toothless circled them with his own gummy smile, bending in a playful bow. Before she even bothered to untangle herself from the wild boy beneath her, she was reaching for the Night Fury, grabbing his ears in her hands and giving his face a little shake. "You're gonna fly today, Toothless!"

Hiccup sat up, but didn't dislodge her. His eyes were wide. "Really?"

She nodded, standing and offering her hand to him. He took it and let her pull him to his feet. "Fishlegs says it's done. He should be right behind me with the rest of the pieces."

The wild boy turned to his Night Fury and knelt, giving the dragon generous scratches up and down his chin. "You hear that?!" The two exchanged a series of whirs and whumping, a language Astrid knew she'd never understand. It ended with the young man tackling the dangerous creature to the cove floor and engaging him in a wrestling match punctuated with happy yelps and gentle nibbles.

The blonde set her hands on her hips. Her teeth sank into her lower lip, gnawing at the smile there, and then she stopped herself. When had it become second nature for her to bite back genuine feelings? She swiped her tongue over the indents her chewing had left and shook her head at the two rolling in the grass.

Hiccup lost the match, of course. The Night Fury pinned the boy under his belly and turned his head to fit the entirety of Hiccup's neck

(and the lower half of his face) in his mouth. Then he retreated and gave the human a bat on the forehead as if to say, "There. I killed you." His victory stance was proud.

"Yeah yeah, you big scaly cheater." Hiccup struggled under the dragon's weight, but his grin hadn't faded. "Just you wait!"

In response, Toothless lapped at the boy's face with slobbery, wet licks. Astrid cringed at the gooey sight, but Hiccup only laughed and wiped it away with his shirtsleeves.

So it really is no big deal to dragons. Her hand wandered absently to her right shoulder, brushing over the spot where Hiccup's tongue had been the night before. Despite being hidden under her shirt and her furs, the little path of skin seemed to sizzle with the memory. She felt her fingertips digging into the fabric. Her smile faltered.

"Hey, Hiccup?" Astrid squatted next to Toothless and the young man he had trapped.

"Yeah?" His eyes were bright and glittering, a shade of emerald that should have been impossible. Slimy dragon spit made his cheeks and forehead shiny, and caused his bangs to stick up at an odd angle.

She put her elbow to her knee and propped her chin on her fist. "I'm sorry about last night. I over reacted."

"It's okay," he assured her, and then chuckled with a furrowed brow. "You and Fishlegs are both so weird about touching."

Narrowing her gaze at him, she leaned back a fraction. "Did you lick Fishlegs, too?"

"No." His head tilted. "Would it be strange if I did?"

She snorted and reminded him, "Mate thing."

"Ah." Hiccup squirmed then, and Toothless crawled away to allow him his freedom. The young man rolled gracefully to a resting position, sitting up on the balls of his feet. "I'm starting to think maybe you should just tell me all your mate things so I know what _not_ to do."

"That would be a long list." She raised one blonde brow at him.

Shrugging, he held his hands out in an open gesture. "It's that, or get mad at me every time I touch your hand or..." He seemed to struggle for a second, as if he was searching for a suggestion. "I don't know. Blow in your ear."

She turned red.

"_Really_?" Hiccup threw his hands up. "Humans!"

"Dragons!" Giving him a matching expression of exaggeration, she shook her head at him. "Why do you have to be all over each other? Do dragon mates not have stuff like this?"

His eyes seemed to search the air for an answer, but they didn't seem to be finding anything. "Not really. I mean, obviously you don't _mate_ with another dragon's mate. Some give each other claims, but other than that, there's no special mate things like you humans have."

She furrowed her brow. "Claims?"

"Bite marks. They kind of develop over the years. The females bite the underside of a male's neck during courting. Almost like a kill bite, a display of trust." Hiccup used his hands to explain, turning his fingers into jaws. They clamped around his throat, somewhat mimicking the way Toothless had won their wrestling match. "And then he bites the back of hers while they're mating." His hand moved from his throat to beneath her braid, his fingers giving her neck a little squeeze. "Since dragons mate for life, those who have been together for years usually have scars. Claims."

Astrid found herself fascinated, though the warmth of his palm and the brushing of his fingertips over the place he'd licked were a little distracting. "That's... pretty cool."

"Humans seem much more possessive," he replied, drawing his touch back. A strange expression overtook his features, something like hesitance and a touch of fear. "Snotlout won't be angry with you for what I did, will he?"

She rolled her eyes. "I don't plan on telling him." Hiccup's gaze dropped to the grass, and there was a long moment of awkward silence between them. She tugged at blades of grass. "Humans only lick each other during- well- intercourse. But it wasn't the _licking_ so much as... well, _where_ you licked me."

He glanced back up, raising his brows. "Your neck?"

Nodding, Astrid, sat back and stretched out her legs. She wasn't sure how he stayed in his crouches so long- it hurt her knees and thighs. "It's kind of an intimate area," she explained, pulling her braid to the right, to cover the imprint he'd left. Holding out her fingers, she began to list off the areas that were out of bounds. "Neck, waist, lower back. Obviously the chest and groin. Hair, unless you're a girl. Hands are kind of one way or the other."

That peaked his interest. He cocked his head to the side. "We've touched hands."

Chewing on the corner of her lip, she reached for his hand and stretched out his fingers. "We've touched like this." She positioned his hand the way he'd held it out for her the very first time they'd met. Then she brushed her fingertips across his palm. Beneath the light touch, she noticed his mouth twitch. "This is okay. _This_ isn't even really that bad." She pressed her palm to his so that their hands were mirrored.

"What else?" His voice was a little quieter, almost low. If she wasn't imagining things, his eyes had flickered a shade darker.

"Um." She wracked her brain. "We have high-fives." Her hand gave his

a light smack in demonstration. "Most anyone can do these. Kind of like a victory thing." Then she twisted his wrist just slightly so that his arm was horizontal and slid her palm into his. "This is a handshake. These are more formal, for greetings or agreements, or showing respect. Sometimes you'll grab the other person's wrist or forearm, depending on what area you're from."

His gaze was rapt, his attention focused sharply between them.

Astrid swallowed. She retreated just a couple of inches, and then laced her fingers with his. "Any prolonged touching of the hand is for mates. Occasionally family, but not like this. Hands and fingers don't just rest like this unless you're mating or planning on it."

His eyes cut to hers. She let his hand go.

Straightening, she tried to remember where she'd left off, but the buzzing feeling from the previous night was beginning in her fingertips and slowly stretching down her arm. "You can pat shoulders, but not put your arm around them. Touch someone's back, but you can't leave your hand there for too long. You don't lick unless you're in the process of mating. And kisses- you never kiss somebody you're not mating."

"Okay, you're lying," he interrupted. "You just don't want me to touch you at all so you're making stuff up."

"I am not!" Her eyes went wide in defense. Stretching an arm toward the mouth of the cove, she gestured vaguely towards the village. "Ask Fishlegs if you want!"

His half glare was dubious, inspecting her with suspicion. "My mother kisses me and dragons all the time. Less since I was young, but still."

"On the mouth?" she blurted, but then she realized- of course not. She should have known that growing up with a human mother, Valka probably would have dropped kisses onto Hiccup's hair, his forehead, his cheeks. It made sense that dragons couldn't kiss- they didn't have lips- but a kiss pressed to a dragon's rough scales would be just like showing affection to a child.

Hiccup looked scandalized. "My mouth? Why would she-"

"It's what human mates do," she interrupted, waving a hand as if to excuse the thought. "I forgot about your mom for a minute. Moms kiss their babies. And the dragons would be sort of like that to her, I guess." The thought of something as deadly as Toothless being treated like a little one was strange, but sometimes the sight of his happy expression did make her chest squeeze with a pang of affection.

He thought about that for a minute, and then she watched his eyes very clearly drop to her lips. It was suddenly very difficult to resist wetting them, or nibbling at them. She wanted to tuck them in, to hide them from his gaze, but then she was doing the same. Recalling the ghost of his mouth across her shoulder just before his tongue had darted about, she wondered how they would feel if they'd been moving with pressure. How they would mold against her skin. His

lips against hers suddenly didn't seem so frightening as they had the night before.

"So, no prolonged hand-touching," he began, his throat sounding as dry as hers felt. "No touching between the collar and the knees. No blowing in ears, no licking your neck, and especially no mouth kissing."

It took Astrid a minute to realize that she was blushing, but when she did, she brushed her bangs out of her eyes and attempted to glance away. "Yeah," she nodded. "Those are the big ones."

"Huh." Sitting back on his heels, he cocked his head to the side. "So, does that mean I can lick you as long as it's not an off-limits place?"

"Hiccup!" she sputtered, trying to remember what places that left open to the wet heat of his tongue. Did that include shoulders? As she floundered for words, her mouth gaped and tried at half-formed protests that seemed to die just before they fell.

His expression hung somewhere between chastised and amused. "No, then."

She found herself shocked at the mental block seeming to keep her from telling Hiccup that he was never allowed to lick her again. In her brain, the words were easy. But using her teeth and tongue to form them was another story.

For a moment, she thought she was on the verge of a sentence that would express her feelings plainly and clearly, but then there was a noise above them, drawing their attention. Even though she knew Fishlegs was supposed to meet her in the cove after lunch, even though their hiding spot was far and well hidden from the village--every time she heard a noise outside the peaceful haven, her instincts made her tense. Her muscles would clench, ready to rise and strike. And for a brief moment, terror would pound through her blood.

She'd invested too much to be discovered now.

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs called, appearing above them. He waved down and held up a large, rolled bundle. "Can you catch?"

The wild boy leapt to his feet, and Astrid followed suit. A strange daze had settled over her during their conversation, but now that she could actually see the fruits of their labor within arms' reach, the excitement she'd been having trouble containing began bubbling back to the surface. She stole a glimpse of the glee on Hiccup's face and felt a smile itching at her lips.

"I got it!" he answered, holding out his arms. With a gentle little toss, Fishlegs sent the prosthesis down, and the bundle made a chorus of metallic clinkings as it landed safely in Hiccup's grasp. Unable to wait, she extended a hand to brush across the outside leather, and he flashed her a grin.

Their patience was tested as they allowed Fishlegs his painstakingly slow climb down the rock face. Toothless, having heard the new visitor's arrival, had popped up between them and begun curiously

sniffing at the project. Astrid wondered if he knew what they'd planned- they'd had to chase him down and bribe him with fish to get him to sit still for measurements and fittings, and yet, she couldn't help but think that he understood. That he knew that it was all so he could fly again.

"Can you get the other pieces?" Hiccup asked her once a breathless Legs had touched solid earth.

Giving an affirmative, she jogged across the cove to the hiding spot where they'd stashed little items like belts, buckles, connecting rods, and the sort. The largest item of note was the saddle Fishlegs had to create for Hiccup. The feral young man had stared at the thing with a blank expression when Legs first pulled it out, and then once Astrid explained what it was for, his lip curled back with distaste. But it was necessary, Fishlegs had explained as he chased Toothless in an attempt to try on the saddle. The rig had to have something to attach to.

Still, when Astrid made her way back to the guys with the saddle under her arm, the look Hiccup gave the thing was still far from enthusiastic. They'd unrolled the little bundle and started assembling the several pieces of the pulley system. The blonde watched with impossible anticipation as the two men- with her occasional assistance- turned a pile of leather and metal into a prosthesis. Having seen the first rough sketches scribbled on parchment, seeing the finished product gave her an acute sense of satisfaction.

Even the Night Fury seemed to taste the excitement in the air. He sniffed and circled them as they worked, and then when they turned to put the saddle on his back, Toothless hardly struggled at all. Then Fishlegs was hooking the pedal system in place. Hiccup was testing the tension of the cords. And then the fin was presented to the dragon.

He didn't seem to want them to touch his tail at first, making them chase him in tight circles until Hiccup pounced and gave the Night Fury's ear a bite. Toothless had flopped down with a hilariously human sigh, but he also gave the wild boy a little swat of irritation. Astrid made herself useful by rewarding the dragon with plenty of scratches, giving Hiccup and Fishlegs the opportunity to buckle him into the contraption.

"Have you been studying the positions?" Legs asked as they tinkered.

"Day and night," the brunette answered. "I'm not worried about remembering the positions. I'm worried about actually putting them into practice once we're in the air."

"What would you say is the likelihood of you plummeting to your death?" Astrid wondered aloud. She let her eyes slide from Toothless' baffled expression to the back of Hiccup's head. "What happens if you get up there and something happens?"

"I guess I fall," he answered slowly but lightly, wrestling with the Night Fury's twitching tail. "But I bet while I'm up there it'll be the most awesome five minutes of my life."

That wasn't comforting. Astrid felt a vague dread suddenly creeping into her throat, staining the edges of her excitement with a new worry. The prosthesis had seemed like such a dream, and now that the dream was quickly becoming reality, she found herself afraid for Hiccup. Uneasiness churned in her stomach. "Just stay low, if you can."

She could tell the exact moment that Toothless felt the weight of the prosthesis on his tail. He froze, his ears lying back just slightly. And then in a blur of movement, he was shaking them off and flexing his good fin. Eyes practically bulging, he fluttered his wings open, and their span made Astrid take a step backwards and gasp.

"Wait for me, bud." Hiccup stood and held out a hand towards the Night Fury, but his warning was ignored. The dragon sat back in a low crouch, and then in a blur, he shot into the air. The young man sighed and frowned, and Astrid watched with pity as the prosthesis flapped uselessly in the air. With a confused glance backwards and a loud shriek, Toothless glided halfway across the cove before falling ungracefully. He landed in a crumpled ball not far away.

Fishlegs made a little whimpering noise, holding his hand out towards the dragon. She had a feeling, though, that his concern was more for the rigging.

"Toothless," Hiccup scolded. He crawled over to the Night Fury on his hands and the balls of his feet. Extending a limp hand, he bumped his knuckles against the dragon's chin. "We've got to work together, bud. You and me."

Toothless shook off the shock of his fall with a frown, snorting with aggravation. Astrid could sense his fierce disappointment, his frustration, and her heart ached for the dragon. She wrung her hands in front of her as she watched Hiccup nudge and encourage Toothless. Then he was shifting around the Night Fury's side, lifting himself experimentally into the saddle. It looked absurd- like a sheep wearing boots. But when Hiccup slid his foot into the pedal and shifted into one of the positions she knew for a fact he'd been practicing, the prosthetic tailfin snapped to life.

Both she and Fishlegs made little gasps. Her gaze slid to Hiccup's face- he'd twisted in the saddle to watch, and his eyebrows climbed high at the sight of the open prosthesis. He breathed a laugh and shook his head with awe.

"Remember not to go towards the west side of the island," Astrid suddenly blurted, thinking of the stir he'd create if he flew over Berk in the middle of the blue sky. "Keep away from the village or they'll probably shoot at you."

"Yeah, I suspect this'll be difficult enough without dodging sharp things." He gave her a sardonic grin. "Any chance of you talking to them about that any time soon?"

The corner of her mouth tilted upwards. "Don't plummet to your death and I'll consider it."

Something crackled between them when they held each others' gazes then. A strange cord of understanding, the unspoken tremors of her fear for him meeting his quiet reassurance. In a strange moment of

realization, she decided that she'd grown inexplicably fond of the feral young man. It was a dangerous attachment, one that could turn on her at a moment's notice, but she couldn't help but recognize it for what it was.

Astrid fiercely prayed that the tailfin would hold up to the rigors of flight. She laced her fingers together to disguise their trembling.

"Okay, Toothless," Hiccup inhaled deeply, giving the dragon a pat on the neck and looking to the sky. She noticed that he didn't hold onto the horn that Fishlegs had built into the saddle, but leaned forward against the back of the Night Fury's head. "Let's give this another shot."

"Good luck, Hiccup." Fishlegs shifted from one foot to the other, seeming just as nervous as Astrid. "Remember, if the rigging fails, don't try and save the fin. Get down safely."

"Thanks, Legs." The wild boy gave the Viking a nod, his gaze still fixed on the sky as Toothless moved restlessly beneath him. Astrid noticed the natural fluidity with which Hiccup rested atop the saddle, his hips and spine responding to each of the dragon's motions. Despite his distaste for the saddle, it seemed like he was born to sit on a dragon's back. "If I die, it was great to meet you."

"You can't die," the girl bit out a little too quickly. "You owe me a flight."

His answering smile was blinding. "Guess I should learn how to work this pedal, then, huh?" And then, with a whispered noise to Toothless, he pressed himself against the dragon's neck and switched the leather fin into position.

Astrid held her breath. Toothless' wings stretched wide again. His knees bent, his muscles tensed, and then like an arrow from a bow, he flew forward. The gust of wind he kicked up made her bangs flutter, and the sound of his beating wings was shockingly loud. It was a matter of seconds before the Night Fury cut through the air, over the lip of the cove, and out of sight. She could hear Hiccup's shout of victory growing faint as they disappeared. Her heart gave a sickening lurch, and she glanced over at Fishlegs.

"Promise me it won't go wrong," she pleaded, her voice low. The blonde couldn't ever remember making so desperate a request of anybody.

The young man's own expression was still glowing with wonder and pride, but he shook his head at her words. "I don't want to make a promise I can't keep."

And so they watched. And they waited. And she prayed.

10. Chapter 10

****The amazing new cover art for Wild Hearts was done by the incredibly talented Tumblr user Kudalyn!****

****Chapter 10.****

Snotlout's arm was around her shoulders. Snotlout's arm was around her shoulders and she wasn't wrenching it off. Snotlout's arm was around her shoulders and she wasn't wrenching it from its socket because while Snotlout's arm was around her shoulders, his thumb brushed against a patch of skin that she'd let another man lick. And she was thinking about him licking it again.

It would be in a purely friendly way, she reasoned as she stared absently at Tuff's mouth. It was moving. He was saying something. But her mind was on other things. Particularly Hiccup's tongue- the way it had chased a drop of plum juice down his wrist while they ate and made adjustments to Toothless' tailfin. It would be just like two pals patting each other on the back. Except with their mouths.

But still. Snotlout wouldn't know that Hiccup's licks would be purely platonic. So she let the arm stay. A privilege she was not afraid to revoke if it wandered.

"I've got a scar on my ass that would say otherwise!" Tuffnut was exclaiming when she redirected her attention to the conversation. It'd seem that he was revisiting the story of the Monstrous Nightmare that had nearly taken her out several months back.

"Dude, you've only got that because the chief pulled you out of the way in time." Ruffnut raised a critical brow at her twin and chewed at the large hunk of potato she had speared. "And you spent the whole night crying while Mom rubbed that salve on your butt."

Snotlout snickered. "Nice, Tuff."

"Shove it up yours."

"This is what a real scar looks like." Snotlout made a fist with his left hand and held up his forearm, showing off the four pink scars running across the otherwise pale skin. Astrid remembered when the Gronkle had mauled him when they were sixteen- he'd thrown up his arm to protect himself and ended up with inch-deep gashes. But he loved them. Showed them off whenever he could.

Ruffnut snorted. "You want to see a real scar?" She pointed at Astrid with her potato. "Show 'em the one on your thigh."

Astrid shook her head and gave the girl an indignant splatter from her bowl of stew. "I'm not showing them my thigh."

Brushing broth off of her cheek, Ruffnut continued, unfazed. "It's totally gnarly. All twisted and mangled. Seriously, like next time there's a Nightmare, I'm volunteering to get caught in the crossfire."

A scowl pulled at the corners of her mouth. She loved her friends. Really. She'd die for them if she had to. But sometimes the way they looked at the fighting, at the battles, at the war- it was like they were still fourteen. Just beginning dragon training. She was in no place to talk- when they'd first been led into the kill ring, she'd been just as excited as any of them about littering her skin with claw marks and burns. But somewhere down the road she'd realized that the pain wasn't worth the glory. Not when it was just another fight

in a legacy of a seemingly endless war. There was no victory in them.

Her eyes wandered the Great Hall, letting her mind fade again. Fishlegs was missing for the evening, catching up on orders in the forge. He'd gotten behind in his work since so much of his time was spent on Toothless' tailfin. She considered stopping by and keeping him company.

Across the hall, she could see the council's table, with Stoick the Vast at its head. The chief was bent over a map, likely retracing the last sail route he and the adults had taken on their last search for the elusive dragons' nest. She'd been on two or three of those quests, but they always turned up empty, and Berk needed protecting. So she generally stayed behind with the younger tribe members and acted as a line of defense against raids. The season was getting cold, though, and they were likely planning one more search before the harbor iced over and the waters became nearly unnavigable.

Her eyes slid over Stoick's broad shoulders, narrowing as she evaluated the men at his left and right. With Gobber making large gestures on one side, and Spitelout Jorgenson muttering intensely on his other, it would seem they were arguing. The chief's mouth was set in a deep frown.

She glanced back at the more animated of the two. Ever since she'd heard Valka's name slip his lips, Astrid had watched Gobber with suspicion and curiosity. There hadn't been a spare moment for her to corner him, or a tactful way to bring up Hiccup's mother. But every time she heard his rough brogue across the room or crossed him in the village, she thought. And she wondered.

"Hey," Astrid began, interrupting Tuffnut mid-sentence. It must have been more unusual than she thought for her to contribute to conversations, because when she spoke up, everyone fell quiet and looked at her. She blinked. "Why do you guys think Gobber never got married?"

"Why?" Ruff asked, a smirk playing at her mouth. "Fat old men starting to look more appealing than Snotlout?"

Her expression went flat, and though she didn't mean for it to, it made a grin of pride spread across her intended's face. "Funny," she deadpanned, making it clear she found it anything but. "I was just wondering."

"Never thought about it," Snotlout offered with a disinterested shrug. "He stays pretty busy."

"Do you know if he was married before? Like maybe before we knew him?" Astrid was unsure whether her questioning sounded too pointed, but surely it was impossible for them to know why she was asking and what she wanted the information for.

She wasn't really sure _what_ she'd do with what she knew if she ever discovered the identity of Hiccup's father. There was no telling if he was even a part of the village anymore. It was completely possible he'd sailed for safer waters or been eaten by the dragons Hiccup and his mom loved so dearly. Would she say something to him if she found him? Would Hiccup be happy to know?

"I've never even _seen _him with a woman," Tuffnut commented, wrinkling his nose and twisting to look at the chief's right-hand man. "Not since I can remember, at least."

"What about kids?" Astrid leaned forward, furrowing her brow. "Do you think he ever had any?"

Ruff shuddered. "I'm sure you mean well, trying to hook him up with a lady friend or whatever you're doing, but I _really_ don't want to think about Gobber's reproductive system." Her disgusted gaze slid to her brother. "I hardly want to think about _you_ having one."

"I don't know anything about him," Tuff told her with a shrug, ignoring his twin's slight. "You should ask Legs. He spends more time with him- he might know."

She had. He didn't.

Astrid glanced down at her near empty bowl, picking at the floating pieces of mutton that bobbed through the oily top layer of stew. She'd spent so much time with Hiccup and Toothless, watching them cut through the sky and make loop-de-loops through clouds that she'd missed dinner with her family. She'd been forced to join the rest of the village in the later meal.

The corner of her lips crept upwards at the thought of the wild boy and his dragon. After they'd shot off from the cove, she'd hardly been able to get them to come down. The first time she caught sight of them flying overhead, she'd shrieked with delirious excitement and punched Fishlegs in the arm. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so ecstatic, so breathless. Her cheeks had begun to ache from smiling and laughing, and every time Hiccup and Toothless flashed across the clouds, she bounced like a child begging for sweets.

She'd thrown herself at him when they finally landed, bright-eyed and beaming. Hiccup had slung his leg over the Night Fury and yelped with enthusiastic triumph. Grabbing the dragon by the gums, he shook his head and made some unintelligible dragon cries. Toothless was panting and letting his tongue fall lazily to the side. That was when Astrid tackled the wild boy.

"It worked!" she'd squealed as she threw her arms around his neck in a tight hug. "You didn't die!"

Hiccup had thrown his head back with laughter, crushing her to his chest without a second thought. At the time, it hadn't felt awkward or strange. She'd been so relieved that he was unharmed and that all of their hard work had paid off and that they were one step closer to saving the village- she'd launched herself at him without a thought to their physical proximities. Now, staring into her bowl of stew, she recalled the warmth of him, the swell of his chest against hers as he attempted to catch his breath. He'd been a little sweaty, and the salty scent had mixed with a smokiness that wasn't altogether unpleasant.

She warmed at the thought. His arms around her had felt natural. Heavy, but like a weight holding her together when she thought she might fall apart. It'd been strangely natural, and she found herself

disappointed when he pulled away to give her his first ever high five. He'd held out his palm to Toothless too, and the dragon had bumped his nose against it. If possible, Hiccup became even more excited.

Her fingers went to brush across her neck, but made contact with the bristly hair on the back of Snotlout's wrist. It drew her attention back to the arm stretched across her, and she bit her lip. It was warm too, but where Hiccup's had felt like an anchor, Snotlout's felt like a noose. The longer she thought about it, the harder it became for her lungs to wring oxygen from the air. Her chest felt tight, the noise of the Great Hall suddenly constricting.

"I think I'm gonna turn in early," she blurted, pushing back her bowl and shrugging off Snotlout's half-embrace. Her knee jostled the table as she swung her legs over the bench style seating. "Catch up on some sleep."

The teens eyes followed her as she stood, some with spoons paused in front of their open mouths. Snotlout had a brow raised at her. The twins gave her matching expressions of concern.

"Okay?" Ruffnut slowly replied.

Astrid nodded and picked up her bowl. "See you guys tomorrow." Her throat felt thick, and she was overly warm as she took her dishes to the kitchen for washing. She kept shifting her shoulders, rolling and stretching them as if she could dislodge the feeling of Snotlout's arm wrapped around her. But the stifling feeling lingered.

The chilly evening air helped, clearing her brain of the muffled whispers that had begun slithering through her ears. Some of them sounded like her mother, some like Hiccup, some like Stoick the Vast. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and marched forward, trying to pick out the sound of her own voice through the clatter. Some days it felt like it was getting louder, like she could finally hear herself think, and then other days it was impossibly drowned out by other demands.

It took her several long strides to realize that one of the voices she was hearing wasn't in her head.

"Astrid! Hold up!"

She stopped on her heel, swallowing her anxieties in time to turn and face Snotlout. "Yeah? What do you need?"

He shook his head as he came to stand in front of her. "Nothing." His boots crunched over the gravel pathway leading back towards the village, and she could hear the way it shifted under his weight. "We were just talking- you've been kind of weird lately."

Her eyes focused on his, and she saw the reluctance there, the apprehension. And then a little deeper than that, worry. It was a rare thing that Snotlout showed concern for anyone other than himself, so the fact that he'd gone after her alone was an impressive feat. She must have truly been behaving strangely.

"I'm okay," she reassured him, even as his presence bore down on her like a stone settling above her. It wasn't that he was trying to be

imposing or anything. But with- she tried not to wince at the thought- with Hiccup, everything felt so light. So weightless, and everything in comparison felt physically taxing. Every breath felt like she was inhaling smoke. She wanted to be held, and tightly, by arms that could squeeze it all from her lungs.

"Look, I get that you didn't really get to pick me." Snotlout came out and said it- the uncomfortable thing that eternally hung between them. "I don't know why, but you've been acting different again. Like right after the handsal. I thought we were getting... better?"

Astrid sighed, and her eyelids fell closed. Just another heaviness. "Snot, I've told you. Can it wait until after the wedding? I- I don't want to be your wife until I am your wife. You understand?"

"Until you have to be," he added, a little bitterness to his tone. "Would you rather Fishlegs? Tuffnut? Did you want somebody else?"

Her eyes flew open just so they could roll to the heavens. "No!"

"Then why is it such a terrible thing to marry me?" She couldn't decide if the hurt in his expression was a wounded pride or a wounded heart, but it was there. "I'm trying to make this easier, but you shut me out at every turn."

"Because you picked for me!" she told him for what had to have been the thousandth time. "I didn't get to choose you, Snot! You showed up at my house and set this deal and I had no say in it! Maybe I would have married you- maybe I would've married Tuff or Legs. But now I'll never get to find out, because you purchased me." They'd been over this. Again and again, but it never seemed to set in. He always took it as a personal attack, like it was a front against his character.

"Why can't you just... try?" Shaking his head, he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "I thought you were- things were different between us, or so I thought- and now it's all coming back to this."

"It was always this," she breathed, but a sharp tug of guilt yanked at her. She knew exactly what had changed: Hiccup. Hiccup had come into her life like a storm, rolling in with flashing lightning and gusty winds. Things that were dark were illuminated. The structures and barriers she'd built up to cope with the trap of her life had been knocked asunder. Everything she was trying to become was being washed away, and she was trying to figure out what would be left behind when the clouds rolled back.

"I know who I am," she told him lowly, meeting his eyes and trying to communicate her feelings in some way that he could understand. "But everyone else has some idea of who that is. And I don't know how they think they know when they don't even ask."

"Tell me, then." Snotlout appeared sincerely baffled, holding his hands out at his sides like he was offering himself up as a target for her axe. "If it'll make you feel better about marrying me, tell

me who you are."

She was deflated. Like a sail suddenly losing its wind. The conversation was going nowhere, like always. He would never understand.

Hiccup would. Astrid swallowed. Hiccup wouldn't understand marrying because someone else told her to. He'd be perplexed by the thought of mating- she couldn't believe she was using that word- _mating_ with someone simply because they'd been bought. She thought of the claims he'd told her about, the scars left by dragons from years and years of mating. Her mind's eye pictured the pale pink scar of a bite mark, surrounded by brightly colored scales. Trust, he'd told her it was about. The first bite of a claim was from the female, and it was a sign of trust.

She'd thought it was just for the male. He showed her the most vulnerable part of his body, and he had to trust that she wouldn't rip his throat apart. But it was just as much for the female, she realized. Because as soon as she left that bite mark, she was his. He'd take her neck in his jaws and claim her in every physical sense of the word. But he waited for her signal. He courted her, until she left her mark on him and laid her loyalty at his feet.

She realized that the beasts she'd fought for years had more honor than the man she was to marry.

"Snotlout, I-" Astrid paused, taking in his face. His eyes were watching her, but she was seeing somebody else. Wanting somebody else. And all at once she needed to know if it was because her body wanted it or because her heart did. And so she exhaled, the breath shaky and weak.

And then she kissed him.

She placed one hand on his upper arm and leaned forward, pressing her mouth against his. Snotlout was taken aback at first, and she had to wait half a heartbeat for him to respond, but then his warm lips were moving against hers. The sheer strangeness of it, the utter ridiculousness of kissing the man who would be her husband in just a few months... It should have been enough to make her skin prickle, to make her pulse race. But there was nothing.

The very first time she'd met Hiccup, he'd held out his hand for her. Turned his face away and waited. There was no telling how long it had taken for her to stare breathlessly and take a step forward. And then when she'd brushed her fingertips across the lines of his palm, it had been like a buzzing fire exploding across every nerve. She felt the contact in her chest, like a jolt to her heart. Kissing Snotlout- she could feel the gentleness, his restrained desire for her. But that's all it was. His mouth against hers. The warmth of Snotlout's kiss was like a candle in a snowstorm. The fire that scorched when Hiccup touched her could raze forests.

Astrid pulled away first, blinking with shock and realization. Her gaze searched the ground, unable to look up and see the light in his expression. The hope. Fingertips lifted to her mouth, trembling as she tried to search for sparks or _something_, as if desire and affection could be pulled from the skin by will alone. Her tongue darted out to sweep across her lower lip, but there wasn't even a

taste left behind to savor. Just the bizarre feeling of having lost her first kiss to nothingness.

"Astrid, I-"

"Don't," she whispered, holding up her hand to stop whatever words might follow. Her gaze still stubbornly refused to meet his, searching somewhere beyond him. "I need space." The constricting feeling was rising in her throat again, like two hands crushing her windpipe. "I can't breathe."

"You want me to go back?" he asked, his voice incredulous. "After that?"

"Please, Snot." Her plea was desperate. "I can't think. I can't breathe."

Astrid thought he might say something else. He hesitated, beginning a breath as if he had some other argument to make, but after a moment, he took a step back. Her hand fell away. And then he was turning on his heel, and she lifted her eyes to watch the broad span of his shoulders as he strode back towards the Great Hall. His posture was impeccable. Too perfect.

She didn't run. She didn't rush. When she turned and started for the woods, it was with stunned awe and more than a little fear. Though branches and twigs and fallen leaves cracked beneath her feet, she was hardly aware of where they took her. She'd given up control, and her body was taking her where it knew she'd find relief.

Hiccup's voice echoed faintly above the cove before she even reached it. Immediately she could feel it seeping through her skin, filling all the cracked and splintered parts of her like rain dripping onto parched earth. She was almost surprised he was there- when she'd finally torn herself from his side earlier, she'd almost expected him to depart with Toothless and never come back. But no, he'd stayed. She could hear him speaking to the Night Fury as she approached.

"One more time, bud. It's getting cold again."

She stumbled numbly through the cave's mouth that led to the clearing, her hand blindly tracing the dry stone wall. There was a wet splashing sound from within.

"Ouch! Too much! Too much!"

Astrid pushed into the moonlight and paused at the entrance. Glancing down, she could see wild boy and his dragon in the lake below, steam rising from the crystal clear waters. Toothless was sprawled out on his stomach, resting his chin on his paws. Hiccup was on his knees, naked from the waist up and lowering his unbraided hair to the surface. It looked darker at night than it did when the sunlight hit it. And his skin looked paler. As she slid down to the first plateau, she could make out the spattering of freckles across the tops of his shoulders.

She hadn't noticed those when he'd been naked in her room.

Reaching with her foot, she crawled to the next lowest boulder, to

the spot where Hiccup usually caught her. Part of her thought she should call out to him, but he had his back turned to her, and she could see the faint lines of muscle in his waist and shoulders. The ache in her wrist smarted, but it was nowhere near the sharp pains of the previous week, and she was able to slowly make her way down the rock face. When her feet touched soft grass, she paused and leaned against the towering boulder.

He was laughing, splashing Toothless and finding some sort of hilarity in the irritation on the Night Fury's face. When Toothless retaliated, slapping his tail across the water and sending a wave in the young man's direction, Hiccup was cut off mid chuckle and thrown back. For a moment, he was submerged in the knee-deep water, but then he broke the surface again. When wet, his hair laid well past his shoulders. He shook it off like she'd seen Toothless do several times before, and then he was playfully tackling the scaly beast.

And then she felt it- air, cool and satisfying, flowing into her lungs. Oxygen saturated every cell, and it was as if she was the one coming up out of the water. Like the sight of him was dragging her forward, tearing off the weight that Snotlout's kiss had left around her neck.

"Hiccup," she murmured, though it was quieter than she had intended. She hadn't meant for his name to sound like a breeze or a timid touch.

Still, it got his attention. The young man and his dragon both popped up to look at her with surprise, their brows shooting upwards in almost comedic unison.

"Astrid?" he mumbled, Toothless' jaw fin still held between his teeth. He spat it out and used the dragon's head to push away from the water. Toothless flailed with a grumble. "You're here?"

Pushing away from the boulder, she rubbed her arm apprehensively and approached the edge of the lake. "I needed somewhere to go." She felt like that wasn't enough, so she added, "I'm glad you're not asleep."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Nah, the Night Fury generally prefers being a menace during the night." Her eyes slid from his face down his neck, watching water pool in the hollows of his collarbone and dribble down his chest. The patch of hair that dusted his sternum surprised her, and her gaze followed it as it thinned between his ribs and then thickened again along the faint muscles of his stomach. The hair was thickest where it trailed between his bellybutton and the low-slung waistband of his pants.

Astrid swallowed and forced herself to look away. Her heart had begun to race at the sight.

"Do you want to bathe with us?" Hiccup asked, innocent and unaware of the dark thoughts that had wanted to urge her eyes lower.

The corners of her mouth curved upwards, finding a sort of comfort in the completely inappropriate way he attempted to welcome her. "Mate thing," she told him through a smile.

Toothless cocked his head to the side. Hiccup looked to the dragon

and narrowed his gaze. The Night Fury blinked up at him.

"Don't get any ideas," Hiccup said with a threatening finger.

Astrid laughed, feeling her lungs expanding with what felt like the first real breath she'd been able to take that night. It was almost a dizzying relief, to be in their presence. Where there were no restraints, no expectations or demands. No propriety to speak of or stern suspicions. With every passing moment, she could feel the heaviness slipping from her shoulders.

"We were almost done anyways," he sighed, giving the dragon a little splash and then moving away.

"Don't stop on my account." Shrugging, she found a dry patch of grass near the edge of the lake and sat down. Hiccup's staff laid there next to his clothes, and she absently pulled it into her lap and began tracing the smooth wood with her fingertips. "I'm fine."

With a vague gesture that seemed to say, "Your choice," he lowered himself back into the water and leaned his head back. She should have thought to bring him soap, but he didn't seem to miss it, scrubbing his hands through his wet hair. The dark provided enough cover that she didn't feel embarrassed watching his half naked body, but the starlight illuminated the freckles that dotted his bare skin like constellations.

She liked watching the way his lithe muscles moved beneath his skin as he washed and stretched, but a faint guilt started to nag at her. He probably didn't know how strange his bare skin was to her, so he didn't care if she watched. But if the roles had been reversed, she'd be turning his face into her target board. So she glanced down and gave him the privacy he didn't know he deserved. Moonlight glinted off the runes carved in the staff, and she rubbed the pad of her thumb over one word: _rekindle_.

When she tilted the staff to get a better look, she noticed that the entire thing was etched with seemingly unrelated words, some common, some unusual and exotic. Her brow furrowed as she tried to find a theme, but none came to mind.

"What do all these words mean?" she finally asked, inspecting a sloppily carved _maelstrom_. "_Is it like an enchantment?_"

Hiccup snorted, and the water sloshed around him as he climbed out of the lake. He fell ungracefully at her side, and she could see the warmth rising from his skin as well as she could feel it. "No. They're just words." Wringing the water from his hair, he reached over and dragged his furs around his shoulders. Then he took the staff from her hands and began running his hands over the wood.

"I already told you my mom and I rescue dragons, right? From trappers?"

She nodded, bringing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them.

Hiccup inspected his staff with a faint smile. A drop of water raced from his hair down his neck. "Well, I didn't get to join her until I was older. When she first started saving them, she went alone and

left me with the dragons. It'd be a few hours at first. Then a day." His fingers slid over the curve of the scythe-like blade at the tip, and she realized it wasn't as sharp as she'd always thought. "Eventually she'd be gone two or three days at a time, and she started teaching me how to write. So we could send messages through tracking dragons back and forth."

He used the tip of the strange cream-colored blade to scribble his name in the dirt in front of them. His expression was nostalgic, and there was a touch of sadness to the smile on his lips. "That day she sat me down and showed me the alphabet- it was the day I realized I wasn't a dragon."

Astrid blinked, surprised, and rested her cheek on her knees so she could look at the young man next to her. "How old were you?"

"Seven or eight, maybe," he shrugged. "Mom wasn't good at keeping track of time for the first few years."

She made a little noise to indicate that she understood, and to urge him to continue.

"But anyways, I mean, I'd always known that my mom and I were different from the rest of my family. Obviously we don't have scales or wings. We don't breathe fire." Hiccup's eyes drifted higher, to the stars, and she wondered what he was always searching for when he glanced at the sky. "But she started to teach me reading and writing, and no matter how I tried, I couldn't get the dragons to understand. That was when I asked my mother what we were. And she told me we were humans."

His gaze moved back to the staff. He passed it back to Astrid, and she felt a new weight to it. "The words are just ones I liked and didn't want to forget. Because they sounded nice or they meant something interesting. Just words that made me feel human, even when sometimes I didn't want to be." Hiccup shook like an animal again, water from his hair splattering across her arms and face. "Sometimes I need them to remember what I am and what I'm not."

Astrid watched his expression, unsure of how to answer. She wanted to have some brilliant reply to his story, to tell him she related to him and mourned for him. But she could only use the back of her hand to wipe the droplets of water from her cheeks. "Sounds like you needed somewhere to go too," she murmured.

Hiccup grinned wryly, nodding and watching the water ripple in the dim evening light. "Yeah. You could say that." His gaze slid to hers, and he gave her a little bob of her head. A gesture to say something. "What about you? Why did you need to be here?"

She sat up. Searched his handsome face for some sort of wisdom, a way he could change everything else like he'd changed her mind about dragons. Her lips parted, and she met his own reaching gaze with something that felt like pleading. "I don't want to marry Snotlout," she whispered.

They were silent for a long moment, breathing and staring into the other's eyes. The only noises were the screech of nature and the splashing of Toothless chasing a bug across the bank. Despite the weight of her confession, she knew he'd already been told the truth

by Fishlegs. And the lack of shock, of a reaction- the freedom to just say the words and be done with them- it calmed her. Soothed her.

Hiccup swallowed and then glanced away, reaching over to his pile of clothes. He untwisted his shirt and pulled it over his head. "You know, I have found the absolute best way to forget about everything. It works every time."

The corner of her mouth pulled tightly. "What's that?"

"Toothless!" he called, and then made some soft noise with his lips and teeth. The Night Fury came bounding over, and Hiccup looked to her. "Flying."

Her eyes went wide as he stood and continued dressing, wringing the water from his pants as he went. "I- I don't think-"

Hiccup chuckled and hitched his furs back over his shoulders. "C'mon, Astrid." She had to resist shivering at the way he said her name. Kneeling down, he reached for her hand the way one might approach a frightened forest animal. "It's time we take that flight."

11. Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven.

"Are you sure I don't need rope or something to hold onto?" Astrid asked hesitantly as she watched Hiccup adjust the last strap to Toothless' saddle. She'd been standing to the side with acute apprehension as Hiccup dried off and dressed, wondering if there was something she could say to put this off, to postpone it. But the wild boy was dead set.

"Nope. Just me." He gave the excited Night Fury a little pat and grinned at her. Then his hands were moving to his hair, tangling the damp locks into haphazard braids. Astrid assumed it was so it wouldn't tangle in the wind, and she wondered if she should rearrange her own plait.

"Here," she muttered, stepping forward and pulling his face down to her level. Undoing his messy work, she began twisting the sides of his hair back, feeling the remaining moisture wetting her fingers. "Does your mom usually do this for you?" She wove the side braids into the remainder of his messy mane, pulling it back into his half-up style before binding it off.

"Yeah," he answered sheepishly, feeling the neat style with his knuckles. For a moment, that deterred him, but then he was back to the Night Fury, hooking Toothless' tailfin to the pedal rig.

It wasn't that she was afraid of flying. Falling to her death? Maybe a little. But in reality she was more terrified of what would happen after they landed. "_Just give me one chance,"_ he'd said, "_One flight to prove you wrong. About everything. Then you can turn me in if you want."_"

Would he make her decide as soon as the flight was over? Did he still expect her to turn him in? Did she still _want _to? Perhaps

afterwards nothing would change, and things would be just as they had been. Everything could still go according to plan- they'd wait for the next raid, follow on Toothless, and find out what was controlling the dragons. But she couldn't shake the feeling that after their one flight, everything would change.

"Okay," Hiccup announced, giving Toothless' saddle a tug and hoisting himself over. "You ready, bud?"

The Night Fury gave an enthusiastic bark.

Then the more human pair of green eyes was turning to her. "C'mon." He slid forward in the seat and made room for her, patting the place behind him. Then his hand reached out for her. "Let me show you."

Astrid exhaled slowly through her nostrils. Her uncle had been Fearless Finn Hofferson. But as far as she was concerned, she'd always been the bravest of her clan. And she wasn't about to be frightened away by a wild boy and his dragon.

So, placing her hand in his, she allowed him to help her climb up and into the saddle. It took a minute of settling to get comfortable- at first she'd tried to sit as far back as possible, but the way the saddle curved, it pitched her forward. After a moment, she discovered that the safest and least painful position was pressed against Hiccup's back, the apex of her thighs snugly resting against his hips. She had to resist blushing- it was intimate- and before they'd even taken off, she was feeling a coiling tightness in the depths of her belly. With a little more than nervousness, she knotted her fingers in his furs.

It was then that she noticed his shoulders were shaking.

"Are you laughing at me?" she accused, glaring hotly at the back of his head.

He gave her an apologetic little smile but shook his head. "It's just funny. I haven't ridden with two people since I was a hatchling. And when I did, I was the one on my mother's back." Toothless shifted restlessly beneath them, and she had to resist yelping. Hiccup chuckled again. "Two weeks ago you were trying to kill me. Now you're holding onto me like a hatchling."

"Are we going flying or not?" she growled, reaching up to give a lock of his hair a hard yank.

He sobered, leaning over to rub Toothless' neck. "You heard the Viking," he told his dragon, and her fists gripped his cloak a little tighter. She felt Toothless' muscles tense, and her heartrate doubled as she watched his long black wings rise. Adrenaline flooded through her veins and her breaths were getting heavy before they even left the ground.

When Toothless took off, it was much like how she imagined it would feel to be launched from a catapult. Momentum threw her back against the saddle, slamming her almost horizontal in her seat. A scream ripped from her throat as enormous wings pounded at the air, shooting them off and away from the ground. Where panic was her first instinct, Hiccup seemed to thrive off the rush. His whoop of

exhilaration rang in her ears as wind whipped past them. Astrid had thought holding onto his furs would be enough, but when she peeked at the quickly disappearing earth, she yelped and wrapped her arms tightly around him.

She buried her face between his shoulder blades, her stomach lurching with every jerky pull of Toothless' wings through the air. It was terrifying, feeling like they were falling for a split second before being pulled up again. Her fingers were claws in Hiccup's sides. Her eyes were screwed tightly shut. Under her breath, because terror had stolen her voice, she muttered prayer after prayer to the gods.

Then the dragon leveled out, and the awful stopping and starting motions gave way to smooth gliding. Still too afraid to lift her face, she whimpered against Hiccup's back. "Hiccup!" she rasped. "Get me down from here!"

His hands wandered over her arms, finding her claws and unfurling them from his cloak. "It's okay!" he called over his shoulder. Smoothing out her fingers with his own, he pressed her palms flat against the space between his belly and ribs. There, she could feel the rumble of his voice and the rise and fall of his breathing. "He didn't fly for almost a month- he's just a little over excited!"

Beneath her, the Night Fury gave a cheery warble that made the saddle shake. Her thighs tightened their grip around his hips. Astrid wondered if Hiccup could feel her heart slamming between them, if he found it hilarious that Berk's fiercest shield maiden was holding on for dear life. "He's making my gag reflex a little over excited."

"Toothless-" he said into the brisk wind. "Take it easy on her!"

If they slowed, Astrid couldn't really be sure. Stray pieces of blond still whipped against her cheeks, and her clothes still twisted and billowed around her. But the dragon did seem to feel more still, less volatile. It didn't feel slower, but they felt steadier. She spent a moment just catching her breath, her face buried in the warm safety of Hiccup's back.

Then, after a few minutes of quiet composure, she eased back. She inhaled deeply. Then without moving her hands from their place on his torso, she squinted through her lashes over his shoulder.

It felt like the oxygen was being stolen from her lungs, for more than one reason. The sheer force with which they rocketed forward sent chilly autumn air into her lungs, like the sky was taking the responsibility of breathing from her. But also, at the sight of the soft blanket of clouds they seemed to ride upon, Astrid's jaw dropped, and she was at a loss.

For a moment, she forgot about Hiccup. She forgot about Toothless, and the noose of Snotlout's arm. There were no villagers to protect, no roles to step into. For a brief second, the combination of acute terror and thrilling wonder was enough to steal every other distraction from her mind. She thought he'd been exaggerating when he told her it was the best way to forget about everything, but she was so caught up in the beauty of the seemingly endless layer of milky-blue clouds beneath them that there was absolutely no space for

any other concerns.

Astrid exhaled a sharp laugh. In her peripheral, she noticed the way Hiccup's cheeks were spread in a grin. There's no ground, she thought a little hysterically, braving a glance down. Strong and scaly black wings glided effortlessly a few yards above the ocean of white. In a bizarre way, it was as if they were sitting still, and it was the earth that was rushing forward to meet them. Her head whipped in every direction, trying to take it all in, find a corner of Midgard that wasn't revealing secrets of never-before-seen beauty.

"Hold on," he advised her, and she quickly obliged. They dipped gently, burying into the frigid wisps. In one smooth movement, Toothless descended sharply, and then snapped back to a vertical position with a capable whoosh of his wings. She laughed as they surged back up through the clouds, spinning as they pierced through and left a twisting mountain of vapor behind. Then Toothless was rearing, and she wrapped her arms tightly around Hiccup as they pulled up- back- upside down. Just when she was about to let out a frightened noise, the dragon was coming full circle, and her stomach dropped at the sensation of being righted once more.

Her eyes glanced upwards- the night sky stretched endless and vast above them, glittering with more stars than she'd ever seen before in her life. The moonlight lent a faint blueness to the black void, accented by the creamy lights spilled like milk across dark velvet. The moon was large and not quite full, bathing them in a glow softer and more gentle than the honest rays of sun. It was almost as if she could lift her hands and feel stars nipping at her fingertips, as if the sky was a great lake whose surface she could ripple.

"It's- it's amazing," she breathed, wondering if Hiccup could even hear her wonder over the noisy rush.

"This is what it is to befriend a dragon," he answered, letting her know he had. Looking back at her, his eyes flickered as if there was fire behind them- not the destructive blaze she'd compared his touch to after Snotlout's kiss, but the heat of flames crackling in a hearth, warming cold and tired bones. "They show us things we'd never see on our own. They free us."

Smiling, Astrid leaned forward and gave Toothless an affectionate pat on the neck. The dragon craned his neck back and gave her a gummy look of mirth. As if to say, "See?"

"He's amazing," she amended, settling back against Hiccup. There was an ice beginning to freeze her fingers, but pressing them against his torso thawed her. She rested her chin on his shoulder and sighed contentedly.

"There's so much I want to show you," he said, half laughing as he shook his head. "Dragons that live in the ocean will carry you to sunken ships. Nightmares'll make nests in the mouths of volcanoes." His hand slipped over hers, and she only noticed because of the warm hum of their skin pressed together. "It's- I can't imagine being human and living on the ground my entire life. I think I'd die."

"I think I was," she whispered. Dying, that is. But from the back of a Night Fury, soaring higher than the mountains of Berk, she'd never

felt so alive. "And all dragons are like this? For you and your mother?"

"There are a few that aren't friendly," Hiccup acknowledged with another glance of those eyes. Funny that he hated being on the ground when those eyes looked like the greenest kind of grass. "But we've adapted and learned how to stay out of their way. There's only a few species I know of that won't give you their absolute loyalty after you earn their trust."

Astrid thought of the Nadder in the arena, how she'd had to earn that trust slowly. With Hiccup's help, with fish, with soft assurances and gentle pats. It made her wonder if she'd earned the kind of loyalty that he spoke of. If the Nadder would honor her with the kind of affection Toothless clearly held for the wild boy.

It could have been hours that they spent weaving in and out of clouds. Once the fear had melted to unadulterated pleasure, Hiccup took her down, darting around rock formations, skimming over the ocean's surface. He seemed to thrive off her gasps, the way she'd press herself tighter against him. They twisted, turned, flipped and rolled, laughing as Hiccup and Toothless worked together to earn her little yelps of excitement. At one point, he took her wrists and held them out at her sides like wings, and she was giggling uncontrollably as he flapped them and made whooshing sound effects. It was silly and childish, and she'd never admit that with her hands held out like that, it felt like she really had wings of her own.

"Do you need a break, bud?" Hiccup asked long after Astrid's cheeks had gone numb and she'd lost feeling in her legs. The dragon gave him a little slap with his ear and gave an indignant sniff, but even Astrid could tell that he'd slowed. The two had spoken earlier about how the Night Fury's muscles likely needed to recover after a month without flight. "Well, I do," he muttered.

And so to her relief and disappointment, they began seeking out a place to land. For all the time she'd spent in the Barbaric Archipelago, she couldn't say where they were even if a map had been placed in front of her. Hiccup seemed to know, though, so she just rested her temple against his shoulder and let him ease Toothless down onto a meadowy cliff-side. The feeling of gravity pressing them into the earth felt unfamiliar for the first time in her life. The dragon stretched and purred happily, sniffing at the grass beneath his feet.

Astrid almost had to peel herself away from Hiccup, her muscles stiff and aching as they dismounted.

"I can't remember a flight ever making me so sore," he chuckled, arching his back and rotating his arms before helping her slide ungracefully from the saddle. Her knees threatened to give out, adrenaline and exhaustion making her thighs tremble uneasily. "I'm not used to sitting in one position for so long." She'd been told about that- about how he was accustomed to standing, crawling, stretching out atop dragons. Because of Toothless' pedal rig, though, he was anchored in one spot, and he'd mentioned the weirdness of that after his first test flight.

"I can't remember the last time my butt hurt like this," she laughed breathlessly, pressing her hand to her chest to feel the excited

rhythm of her heartbeat.

Hiccup fell into his crouch, but there was a laziness to the way he crawled over to the edge of the cliff and collapsed. His eyes closed and he breathed deeply through his nose, reaching high above his head as he sprawled out on the soft earth. It didn't feel unusual to stumble over to him and let her knees crumple beneath her. Her aching body was grateful for the new position. She twisted onto her side and propped her head up on her hand to look at him.

She warmed. It wasn't often she gave herself the simple allowance to watch him without shame. Long, thick lashes rested across the tops of his cheekbones, which were kissed with a spattering of freckles and a faint pink sunburn. She imagined he spent a lot of time with his face upturned to the sky during flights. The slope of his nose was long and straight, leading down to his upturned mouth. His lips weren't especially thin or particularly full, and though she'd never been one for facial hair, the scruff on his jaw had grown on her. Astrid had decided long ago, though she couldn't quite remember when, that his face was one she enjoyed looking at.

"What will you do after the next raid?" she asked after they'd had a chance to catch their breaths. Toothless didn't seem as tired as them- she was vaguely aware of him exploring several yards away- but he'd likely had plenty of sleep that morning. Astrid surely hadn't, but despite the heaviness in her limbs, she was wide awake. "After you find the nest?"

Hiccup's eyes opened, though they looked at the sky instead of at her. "It'll depend on what I find there," he shrugged. "It might be time that we- that you introduce me to your chief."

Astrid's lips pursed, and she thought of Stoick's reaction to Hiccup and his dragon. She wasn't sure when it had happened, but she'd started thinking toward that dreaded day with acute apprehension. In the cove, with only her and Fishlegs aware of his presence on the island, he and Toothless were safe. People were noticing her strangeness, her absence- her mother and her friends, at least, had- and revealing the reason to them meant exposing both her and Hiccup to the village's close examination. Whispers would echo after her, rumors would rise. And they'd likely stare at the feral young man with distrust and disdain.

She wondered if the chief would even let her get an explanation out before he attacked Toothless. The man's hate for dragons was almost as famous as his reputation for slaying them.

"That makes me nervous," she admitted quietly.

He snorted, turning his gaze to hers. "Come on. You tried to kill me. If I can change your mind, I can change theirs too."

Astrid shook her head and looked to the grass, picking absently at weeds. "My chief isn't like me." She thought of the night she'd spent at the fire with Stoick after the last raid. How she'd always felt like they related, were twin souls. Funny how that had changed, when she'd thought it for so long. "I don't know how well he'll listen."

"I can be very persuasive." He gave her a reassuring smile, and then

made a pillow of his forearm behind his head.

Astrid's brow furrowed, concern still gnawing at her. The skin of her face tingled with windburn. She slid a sharp fingernail along the seam of a grass blade. "How did you..." she trailed off, but then tried again. "How did you decide to leave home? If you love the dragons, and your mother doesn't like us Vikings. Why did you choose to come here?"

Hiccup sighed, glancing back at the stars. His expression was distant, almost nostalgic. "My mom's always been there for me. She raised me, loved me, protected me..." Pressing his lips into a thin line, he shook his head. "But there's always been this thing between us. My dad, my family, this whole other life I could've had."

Her eyes searched his face as he explained, and in a way she felt like she was asking him what she should do. How she should go on, knowing that nothing was as she thought. They were in this together, and he'd had the strength to defy his mother's wishes. She was beginning to think it was time she did the same.

"One day, I realized-" Hiccup continued with a shrug. "She picked this for me. We could've come back to Berk after we'd found the way back, used what she'd learned to make the village a better, safer place. But she didn't." As he told her that, she felt a throb of resentment in her chest for the woman who'd not only kept her child away from his father, but also had the means to change Berk and didn't. "It was... easier. For her to stay away."

Astrid's hand wandered away from the grass, her fingers smoothing over the fur of his cloak. "Do you fault her?"

"No." Hiccup was quick to answer, his brow creasing as if even the thought was ridiculous. "Of course not. I love my home, the family I have with the dragons. But-" Wetting his lips, he watched the sky above with an expression akin to distress. "But the more I thought about it, the more I felt like there was this whole other path waiting for me. It's like- like I hear this voice, but I can't tell where it's coming from. And the more I wanted to know, the more my mom and I argued."

His voice rose in pitch, and his arms began to move with vague gestures. "Believe me, Hiccup!" he grumbled in an impression of his mysterious mother. "I tried. People can't be changed. If I thought they could, I would take you to your father tomorrow." Sighing with frustration, he let his hands fall. "I was letting her choose for me, letting her decide what I could be and what I could know."

Her thoughts flickered back to his staff, the words he'd carved in its long neck. Though they'd meant little to her, they were everything to him- pieces of his life as a human in a dragon's world. They gave him something concrete to hold onto, to remind him (as he'd said) what he was and what he wasn't. It was obvious to her that he would feel a duality at war inside him.

"You know who you are, Astrid." At her name, he sat up on his elbows, turning his face to hers and staring at her earnestly. "I saw it from the minute you stepped into the forest. You walk with a purpose, you never take a step without knowing where you're going. I don't have

that."

She thought about his words. She thought about what she'd tried to make Snotlout understand. It was true- there wasn't a second when she doubted her place with the Vikings. Since birth, she'd always known that she was created to protect, to defend. To nurture, even, she admitted, flashing to a memory of the children training in the kill ring. She knew what drove her and what held her.

"I know who I am," she whispered, a sharp ache between her ribs. Their faces were so close, their bodies just inches from entangling. "But.. I don't know what to do."

She didn't want to live a life of what she was supposed to do. Not anymore.

Her eyes dropped to his mouth, and then flitted back up to his pressing gaze. "Tell me what to do, Hiccup."

His brows knit together in contemplation as he watched her face. The fluttering of her heart was picking up again, but this time there was solid ground beneath them. There weren't thousands of feet between her and the earth, but for some reason, this felt just as terrifying. Just lying next to him, the heat of his body biting back the cold air.

Hiccup brushed the back of his hand across her arm. A safe place, she noticed, so he wouldn't scare her away. But despite the lack of scandal in his touch, electricity speared her and made her breath hitch. He parted his lips. "What feels right?"

This, she wanted to answer. The world had shrunk so quickly from something vast and unending to the space inside the evening breeze swirling tightly around them. She'd never wanted something more than she wanted something more. All she could think of was the press of her palms against his beating heart and the roar in her ears as they skimmed over oceans and clouds.

"Wind on my skin," she replied. She gave a single sharp nod. It was the only thing she could say without doubt, without fear. And it was the truest thing. But there was another nudge in her throat that made her hand stray to his clenched jaw.

He didn't answer. There was something unreadable in his expression. Slowly, not closing her eyes lest she miss any change in his gaze, she lifted her face to his. She took a steadying breath. And then she slowly traced the sharpness of his cheekbone with the tip of her tongue.

There was no question to his response. Hiccup's eyes fluttered closed for just a second before flashing open and pinning her when she pulled away. His chest rumbled with a deep noise, a sound akin to Toothless' purrs. She wet her lips, and the taste of his skin chased her tongue back into her mouth. Embarrassment should have flushed her, but all she felt was a hot, unfurling desire. Parts of her that hadn't responded since the night he spent in her room burned under his heated gaze.

Then his hand was sliding up her arm, gathering a storm in the pit of her belly as he went. It dared past her shoulder, hesitating for just

a breath before sliding around the back of her neck and slipping his fingers into her hair. Her elbow slid from under her, and Hiccup twisted so that he leaned above her. When he lowered, she let her eyelids fall, and a shuddering gasp slipped from her lips as the warm wet heat of his own tongue slid from her jaw to her temple.

Astrid curled her arm around his waist, digging her fingertips into the shoulder she'd hid her face against not an hour ago. Afraid to open her eyes, to break the spell, she searched his features with the tip of her nose. Then she gave the corner of his mouth a short, telling lick.

There was a heavy silence, filled only by the sound of their exhales trembling between them. And she was unsure who moved first, but then their lips were meeting- first with a shy brush of friction, and then with a firmer, hungrier taste. His fingers knotted in her braid, holding her in place. Every thundering echo of her heart against her ribs felt like the slam of a hammer in her chest. She shifted, accepting the weight of his body settling over hers.

His mouth was curious, exploring hers with rapt focus. She could feel the awe in it, the discovery of this new kissing. As her hand explored the curve of his spine, he tasted her with fascination, with gentleness and barely bridled want. He hummed with it, and she knew that her soft noises spoke the same to him. His thumb circled the bone directly behind the curve of her ear, and the kiss was suddenly broken as she arched beneath him. He stiffened at the contact before he came back to her.

Hiccup made her dizzy in a way flying hadn't. The exhilaration was still there, the scorching adrenaline and nervous shaking. But her mind had been clear and sharp as they cut through the sky. With his lips molding against hers, his warmth encasing her, she wasn't sure she could spell her own name. Arousal knifed through her, making her most intimate parts throb and ache. They craved him, yearned for him, but the realization was so new that she could only revel in the way her body responded to his touch.

He tore away first, his eyes dark and piercing as he evaluated her expression. She wondered what they saw- swollen lips, wind-tangled bangs, flushed cheeks- but whatever it was he found in her face, he seemed to enjoy. His mouth was just barely melting into a smile, and he breathed something like a laugh.

But then he stiffened. His eyes ripped away, narrowing as he focused on something in the distance, and his upper lip curled back to bare his teeth. His knee came to rest between hers- not to get closer to her, but to assume a protective stance over her.

Astrid sat up, alarmed. Her gaze followed his, but she couldn't make out anything on the dark horizon. Resting a hand on his arm, she felt the tension in his muscles as he glared at the black sky. "What is it?" she murmured, a note of panic in her tone. "What did you see?"

His body relaxed a fraction, but he didn't look away. Hiccup pulled back and slid his grip to her elbow in an unspoken order for her to rise. "I need to take you home. Now."

"Why?" She obeyed the soft press of his hands as he called for

Toothless and helped her up. "What was it?"

He hardly glanced at her before turning away from the cliff and towards the scampering Night Fury. "A Stormcutter," he answered, though the word meant nothing to her. His hands were fists at his sides. "Heading towards Berk."

That she understood plainly enough.

12. Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve.

The flight back to Berk made it clear that Toothless had only been showing off a fraction of his speed when Astrid first climbed into his saddle. The return trip was fast and terrifying, and it wasn't just because of the way the wind pulled at her like rough, shoving fingers. It wasn't the way it blew so hard she could hardly look up from Hiccup's shoulder to squint into the dark. It was the rider's entire demeanor.

Before they'd been interrupted, Hiccup had been relaxed and gentle. It was obvious that he knew he'd succeeded in winning her over, that he'd almost completely changed her mind about dragons. And the kiss they'd shared- it'd been warm and perfect. Astrid was waiting for the regret to set in, to remind her that what she felt for Hiccup was wrong and unnatural, but it never did. The look in his eyes kept flashing through her mind- the way he'd looked at her after she'd first slid her tongue across his cheek. Like he'd been waiting for her.

But now he was focused. He hardly spoke, at least not in a way she understood. As they tore across the ocean's black surface, leaving foamy waves rippling behind them, he communicated with Toothless in a series of touches, dragon noises, and words. It unnerved her, and when she attempted to ask questions, he would growl back with stressed, vague replies.

"Are Stormcutters one of the unfriendly kinds?" she shouted over the roar of the wind. It had reached a deafening level as their speed increased.

He shook his head, braid whipping violently behind him. "No. Your people will be safe." Pausing, his hands clenched along Toothless' saddle, and he added, "As long as we get there first."

That wasn't comforting. Astrid tightened her arms around his waist and buried her face back against his shoulder. She tried to stifle the simmering feeling in her chest- the anger rising as she realized she'd left Berk unprotected. She'd abandoned the village so she could take off with one of its biggest threats and make out with a dragon rider. While she stung with disappointment in herself, she crushed the fabric of Hiccup's shirt in her hands and tried to remember that it wasn't his fault.

"We're not going to have a lot of time once we reach the island," he called back to her after a few moments of quiet tension. "You'll have to distract your watchman for me!"

Distract the watchman? No. That didn't feel right.

"I have to warn the villagers!" she insisted, seeing a flicker of light on the horizon that had to be her home. "If Berk is in danger, I have to let them know!" A brief flash of panic hit her, the thought that he would ask her to pick the dragons over her people. She'd known from the beginning what he would choose, but she didn't realize that trusting him meant she'd have to make that choice too.

"She wants me!" Hiccup growled, the noise so low she could barely make it out. "She won't bother anyone if I can intercept her."

"You know this dragon?" The lights of Berk were becoming clearer now, yellowish-orange fires glowing in the mouths of their enormous guardian statues. "Is it a threat?"

"It's not Cloudjumper I'm worried about," he told her as Toothless slowed and dove between the shadows of the island. "It's his rider."

Astrid's blood went cold, but she wasn't completely sure why. She wanted to open her mouth again, to press for more answers, but they were too close to make noise now. It seemed that they'd beaten the Stormcutter, or the Cloudjumper, whatever it was, because a peaceful silence stretched over the sleeping island. Hiccup scowled as he found a dark place out of range of the watchtower to land. When they lurched to a stop and Astrid was thrown into his back with their momentum, her stomach gave a nauseating somersault.

"Go," he whispered, gesturing his head toward the front of the village. "If she gets too close and we're spotted, your Vikings will think we're attacking." His hands pushed insistently at her as she urged her frozen limbs to carry her off of Toothless' back. The dragon seemed determined too, his narrowed eyes watching his surroundings, though she wondered if he was just feeding off of Hiccup's anxiety.

Hiccup's words sank in, and her eyes widened a little. If the alarm horn sounded while he and Toothless were in the air, they'd shoot at him no questions asked. She imagined the two dodging arrows and axes and bolas as they attempted to keep the other dragon away from the villagers. The picture filled her with a sense of dread.

"Okay. I'll do it," she finally answered, nearly stumbling off of the Night Fury's back. Her legs trembled, her knees feeling like they might give out beneath her. She was used to the adrenaline of battle, but this was something new altogether. "Just be careful."

His intense gaze found hers in the dark, and he watched her as Toothless shifted with restlessness. "If something goes wrong, promise me you'll keep him safe."

Astrid answered with a challenge of her own. "Promise me nothing will go wrong."

Expression turning grim, he opened his mouth to say something more, but their whisperings were suddenly interrupted by the long, deafening blare of the watchtower horn. Her heart stuttered, and she watched his jaw snap shut. The blood drained from her face at the dark look he threw towards the village's edge.

"Too late."

He and Toothless took off without a backwards glance. Astrid felt the fear setting in, the knowledge that everything was unraveling in front of them, but she'd never been one to stand by. Swearing under her breath, she took off in the direction of the watchman's tower. As she sprinted towards the coast, lights flickered to life inside the homes she blurred past. She had to swallow the urge to retrieve her axe from her house. How stupid of her to leave it, even if she'd stopped taking it to the cove long ago.

Her mouth felt dry, the warm taste of Hiccup's lips on hers replaced by a sour sharpness that made the moment they'd shared seem like a cruel dream. It'd been safe and special and full of hope, but it wasn't real. No matter how much she wanted it, there were some things that just could not be. She shoved down the ringing sense of dismay and loss, instead clawing for the fierce fearlessness of someone with something to protect.

Even if she wasn't sure who she was protecting anymore.

She could see the enormous dragon before she even stumbled away from the most densely placed houses. It made her jaw drop to see it- this Stormcutter. Unlike any species she'd seen at least a decade, it was at least three times the size of Toothless. Twice as large as the Nightmare that had almost snuffed out her life several months prior. With a flattened nose and armor-like fins that protruded from its face, the beast hovered just yards away from the island. Two sets of wings beat strong and loud through the night air, creating a gusting wind that Astrid could feel on her face. Its eyes scanned the ground, as if searching for something.

She slowed to a stop as she reached the edge of the village. Vikings were stirring, movement sounding behind her. Doors slammed and weapons gave metallic rings as they were drawn. A scream shrieked out, and she knew in a moment that someone else had noticed the frightening dragon.

Only after she found herself in the piercing gaze of the Stormcutter's glare did she remember- Hiccup wasn't afraid of the dragon. Astrid's eyes slid up past the beast's head, her heart picking up speed as she noticed the tall, shadowy figure standing ominously on the dragon's back. Her chest heaved with nervous breaths, her fingers flexing for want of a weapon as she watched the rider silently observe the waking village. It was too dark to make out much, but Astrid could clearly see horns protruding from the black face. Unease made her take a step back.

Others were coming upon the scene. At any other raid, the villagers would be running head first into danger, swinging weapons and shouting battle cries. This, though- one mysterious dragon and its humanoid rider hovering over the island- no one was quite sure what to make of it. Vikings stopped just behind her, their maces and crossbows slowly falling as they gaped up at the intimidating sight.

"What is it?," someone blurted.

"Somebody get Stoick!" another cried.

Astrid watched with wide eyes and a twisting gut as the Stormcutter drew closer. Her heart was a racing thrum, surging loudly in her ears as adrenaline coursed through her system. For every beat of its wings, she inched backwards, the villagers subconsciously following her until they made a large half-ring around the cliffside. Her hands balled into fists, and she glanced back up at the dark figure staring down at them. She exhaled an uneasy breath.

The Stormcutter's claws dug through earth and rock as it found purchase on the island's coast. Gasps and shrieks went up from the gathering crowd. Its wings folded back unto its body, and it gave a screeching roar of warning that made the hair stand up on the back of Astrid's neck. With a grace and agility that couldn't be human, the phantom-like rider crawled down the beast's neck and came to stand at its side. In their hand- a long and dual-ended staff.

A stab of familiarity made her hand fly to her mouth, and all at once Astrid knew who this was and why they had come. _She wants ****me****_, he had said. Hiccup's mother watched the villagers through the eyes of her dragon mask, but Astrid couldn't help but feel that her examination had stopped to rest on her. The terrifying, armor-suited woman took one step forward, then another, and then she slowly lifted her staff.

And then there was a high pitched whir.

"_Night Fury!_"

"_Get down!_"

Astrid searched the sky for Toothless half a second before an explosion crashed between her and the masked rider. The force of it threw her back, and she fell against someone in the ring of villagers before slamming into the ground. Though the breath was knocked from her lungs, she was otherwise unharmed. In her distraction, she heard someone call her name, but her eyes were on the cloud of smoke and debris. Hands reached for her arms, helping her stand. Ruff and Tuff steadied her, trying to determine if she was okay.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from the emerging black shape of the Night Fury, though, or the shadow that leapt from its back. Another large gasp went up from the crowd as the dust cleared and a second horned figure appeared. Hiccup crouched low to the ground in a defensive position, but his staff was obviously held in front of him in threat. At his side, Toothless lowered his head and growled menacingly at the startled Stormcutter.

"Is it really a Night Fury?"

"There's two of them!"

"Are they human?"

"Hiccup," she breathed, her eyes stinging as she squinted through the cloudy air. Equal parts of relief and worry intertwined in a strange mix, and she swept a glance over the crowd to make sure no one was poised to attack. In the flickering glow of torches and moonlight, the riders began circling each other. For every step Hiccup's mother took to the right, he would mirror her. For every step she took

towards the villagers, he would rise from his crouch and snarl. Behind her, Valka's dragon bent low with agitation and confusion, but it didn't move to harm Hiccup or Toothless.

The woman she'd heard so much about inspired more fear in her than Astrid had been expecting. For some reason, she'd been expecting the woman who raised innocent, idealist Hiccup to be less- well- eerie. She tried to remember what he'd said about her- that he thought his mom was afraid to face the villagers, that she'd only come if she thought he was in danger. It became more important than ever that nobody try and harm the two or their dragons.

"D-don't attack," she rasped out, hoping those around her could hear. "Hold your fire."

She didn't seem to need to say so- everyone was distracted by the odd interaction between the riders. Astrid and Fishlegs had seen the way Hiccup moved for weeks now, so she was unfazed by their style of walking, but everyone else was mesmerized by the odd crouching and crawling reminiscent of their dragon enemies. Valka lifted her staff and circled it once above her head before pointing it sharply towards the horizon behind her. Her stance wasn't as deep as Hiccup's, only her bare fingertips brushing across the earth.

That was easy enough for Astrid to interpret. The woman wanted her son to leave with her. Her heart clenched in her chest at the thought. He actually had the means to disappear now. He could go with his mother and never look back. That would have been okay with Astrid twenty-four hours ago- it would've been upsetting to see him go without fulfilling his promises, but she would've survived and gone back to doing what she'd always done. But after what had just transpired between them? After he'd shown her what it was like to fly, and after they'd shared that kiss? The thought made her clench her fists.

Hiccup slashed his own staff in front of him, a very clear no. The air rushing through the holes of the scythe-like tip made a whistling noise. Then he made a more intricate movement that she could follow but not understand.

"What are they doing?" Astrid heard Tuffnut ask next to her. His tone was baffled, but there was also a note of what she thought sounded like wonder there.

"Talking," was her only reply. She could see the irritation in Valka's posture, in the way her arms swung out pointedly and her shoulders rose like the hackles of a wild animal. Hiccup was easier to read- he was calm, but there was a definite determination about him. He would not be budged, nor would he let her draw closer to the village. The way he slammed the club end of his staff at his feet told Astrid as much.

She was fascinated by this sort of communication. Watching with barely stifled anxiety, she thought about riding Toothless, and how she'd had to shout over the wind to be heard. It made sense that Hiccup and his mother had discovered a way to send messages without speaking, and by the way the Stormcutter stole glances between the two humans and the Night Fury, it seemed that even the dragon understood. She tried to interpret Valka's meaning as the woman twisted the staff in a quick twirl before rattling what looked like

beads or cymbals in the weapon's hollowed end. They made a rattling noise, and Hiccup's head answered with a bobbing nod.

Then a voice tore above the whispers of distress and confusion.

"You!" Stoick the Vast bellowed, and Astrid turned just in time to see the chief's arm raise his war hammer. She yelled for him to stop and took a step towards him, but he didn't even look her way. His face was twisted in a furious expression, his snarl more terrifying than the bared teeth any dragon had ever given her. Before she could do anything, he was throwing his hammer with an impossible strength.

Astrid's eyes widened as she sucked in a horrified gasp, but when she followed the weapon's arc, it wasn't aimed at either of the riders. It didn't even stray in their direction, flying dangerously towards the startled Stormcutter. The dragon struck the projectile out of the way with a clawed hand and gave Stoick a vicious hiss. Toothless growled between them, obviously unsure which was the worst threat.

It drew the attention of both riders, who had frozen in their discussion. Astrid did not miss how Valka leapt in front of Hiccup and shoved her son behind her.

"Stoick!" Gobber shouted from afar, running on his peg leg to take the chief by the arm.

His eyes were wild, his chest heaving with furious breaths. It was a shocking sight- the Viking's demeanor usually mirrored his name, even in battle, but now Stoick could not even tear his eyes from the Stormcutter to look at the sight that had the rest of the crowd distracted. "I'll take your heart with my bare hands!" he roared, and it took Gobber and another nearby Viking to restrain the chief.

Astrid's heart thudded with new confusion, her gaze flitting between Stoick and the Stormcutter. Then out of the corner of her eye, she watched Valka push Hiccup towards Toothless. Their discussion was over, it seemed, and he climbed gracefully onto the Night Fury's back. The larger dragon gave the chief one last threatening screech before its rider used her staff to latch onto one of its spikes- then it was spreading its dual set of wings. The cliff's edge crumbled beneath it as it rose.

Hiccup stole a glance in Astrid's direction before turning back to his mother. Then they were both taking off from the island's coast, followed by Stoick's belligerent shouting and swearing. Toothless' prosthetic tailfin flashed behind him as they flew. The entire scene was disturbing- it took her a moment of watching the dragons disappear to realize that she was shaking.

"Woah. That was weird." Ruffnut shook her head at Astrid's side and turned to look at the chief. Now that the threat was gone, the Vikings seemed to explode with excitement and conversation. Her blonde locks were twisted into a braid that the girl knew all too well- the style of someone who'd had to run out the door in the middle of the night. "Wonder what's got his undies in a bunch."

She could only shake her head in reply, unable to pull her gaze away from the dark horizon.

He'd left with her. Hiccup was gone, and she didn't know if he'd be coming back. It shouldn't have made her chest feel as tight as it did.

"Astrid!" The sound of Fishlegs calling her name made her finally force herself to look away. The tall blonde elbowed through the crowd, which had taken to gasping gossip and watching Gobber try to talk down Stoick. Snotlout followed not far behind him. "Was that...?"

"Bizarre," she finished for him, aware of the twins' eyes on her. But she met his gaze as she nodded, answering the question he couldn't word. "Very."

"Have you ever seen that species before?" Fishlegs brow rose, his veiled meaning clear to only the two of them.

"No, but I've heard of it." Astrid folded her arms over her chest and turned her back to the ocean. "I wonder why the chief reacted like that."

"I can guess," Snotlout spoke up then. He hefted his hammer up and let it rest on his shoulder, stealing a glance at his uncle from the corner of his eye. Beneath his helmet, pillow-mussed hair stuck up in every direction. "I've only seen him get that way over his wife."

"I always forget he was married," Tuff commented with a thoughtful sigh. It was then that Astrid noticed that his shirt had been put on backwards.

Something nudged in the back of her mind. A familiarity she should have been able to recognize, some piece of knowledge she couldn't quite brush the dust from. She watched as Stoick the Vast's expression slowly melted from one of violent fury to something different. Gobber had him by the shoulders, trying to calm him down, and all at once, the chief's face fell with twisted anguish. He took a staggering step backwards, as if the strange encounter had stolen all of his strength, and then placed a meaty paw to his helmet. His eyes slid shut.

"It's the dragon that killed his family," Astrid heard herself say. "Isn't it?"

"That's my theory," Snotlout agreed, oblivious to the way her heart had begun to race. He started to discuss the creepy dragon riders, theorizing that they were somehow related to the dragon attacks. Just as Astrid had feared the village would. But she didn't stay to listen.

She broke away from the teenagers, slowly pushing past visibly shaken villagers. As she got closer, she could make out Gobber's voice over the villagers. Astrid could recognize his thick accent, but his words were a jumble to her. All she could understand was the way Stoick's fingers had a death grip on his old friend's shirt.

"Chief." Her voice sounded stronger than she felt. If anything, she felt a little light headed. Both of the Vikings turned to look at

her. "Are you okay?"

Stoick nodded, his hand sliding weakly from the seam of his helmet. "Aye," he swallowed, dropping his gaze. "Aye, I'm fine."

She pressed her palm to the space between her belly and her ribs, the same place Hiccup had placed her hand on his own torso. For some reason, it had the same calming effect. Astrid used to get the same feeling from holding her axe. "That dragon. You know it."

He nodded again.

She wet her dry lips. "It took Valka and Hiccup. Didn't it?"

The chief didn't answer. He didn't need to. The way Gobber and Stoick fell silent and watched her with evaluating eyes spoke plenty.

13. Chapter 13

****Chapter Thirteen.****

The village's fascination and fear of the masked riders didn't wane overnight. Though Astrid had spent the morning praying that the commotion would have passed after the villagers had the opportunity to sleep off the weirdness, she hadn't even left the house before she heard her parents' commentary.

"They're human, I can promise yeh that," her father grumbled. "Though not from this side of the archipelago." He didn't even look up when his daughter came down the stairs, axe slung over her shoulder. She wasn't about to leave it again after missing its comforting weight last night.

"Savages," her mother spat, using a piece of stale bread to scoop up the remains of a jar of preserves. Her expression was dark and unwelcoming. "I wonder how they came to find Berk."

Astrid pursed her lips and tried not to scowl as she approached the table. "Probably got lost," she muttered, filching a slice of the thick brown bread. "They didn't want to hurt anyone."

Her parents glanced up at her with raised brows.

"What makes yeh think that?" her father asked with a gruff sort of unpleasantness. There were crumbs from his breakfast caught in his thick beard.

She tore a bite and chewed with barely concealed irritation. "They could've. They didn't." Not in any mood to argue further or explain herself, the blonde chased a seed kernel around her teeth with her tongue as she tapped the table and turned on her heel. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she strode away and out the door. She hadn't even pulled the door completely closed when she heard the discussion pick up again. Her father muttered something about beasts and demons.

Rubbing her palms against her eyes, she sighed and paused outside the Hofferson house. The heaviness in her bones felt something like the ache of sleepiness, but it couldn't have been that. Her head had hit

the pillow as soon as she'd dragged the blankets over her body the night before. There was a soreness in her legs and hips, too, but that was likely more from straddling a dragon's back than anything. No, the heaviness was something deeper and stranger, and it reminded her faintly of losing a sparring match.

Agitation aside, she strapped her axe to her back and began her morning run. It took longer than usual for her to catch her stride, but once she found it, she chased it with a vengeance. The spattering of villagers who woke with the sun gave her faint waves as she passed, and she nodded her greetings back. Sometimes she'd stop to make conversation, but that morning wasn't a relaxing jog kind of day. It was a sprint until the pounding of her pulse was louder than her thoughts kind of day. And despite the ache that burned in her lungs as she made her loop around the village, it wasn't louder than her brain. Even though the good weather had decided to stick around longer than usual, that still wasn't enough to lift her mood.

Hiccup was gone. And she didn't want to think about why that bothered her.

At first, it hadn't sunk in. She'd crawled into bed with the expectation of hearing his sleep-disturbing smack on her window. For some reason, she'd expected him to be back by morning. But he wasn't.

Astrid shook her head, running into the forest to find a good place for target practice. Her head felt like a too-full bucket of dirty laugardagur water, something she was struggling to keep balanced, lest something unsavory spill out. The sight of Hiccup's mother, tall and terrifying, and the newly discovered identity of his father- she was piecing together the strange circumstances of the feral boy's life, and she was beginning to wonder if she was ready for the consequences of what she was unearthing.

Stoick the Vast. Of all of the men in the village, how could Stoick the Vast have given life to a boy full of such vitality and idealism? He'd stared at her as if she'd turned into a Zippleback when she'd said Hiccup's name, and Gobber's jaw had flapped like something off of one of the fishing boats. There was an undeniable consternation in the way they'd evaluated her, and for a terrifying moment she'd worried that she'd stumbled over some sort of village secret.

But then the chief had flexed his fingers and dropped his gaze. "Aye," he answered roughly, his chest still rising and falling with the lingering emotion of his reaction to Valka's dragon. The one, Astrid now knew, that had stolen her from that very island. "Snotlout tell yeh about them?"

Since it was only a slight fib, she nodded. "Yeah. In passing."

He'd been crowded by villagers then, who clamored for an explanation for the strangeness. No matter what he said to try and appease them, everyone whispered and worried for their safety. Some refused to return to their homes, in case the "horned riders" returned. Some begged that Stoick request aid from neighboring islands. Some reproached him for not doing more to capture the dragons. The chaos made it easy for Astrid to wander away, quietly stunned by her realization. She felt eyes on her, though.

Stoick the Vast was Hiccup's father. She couldn't see it- not in his manner or his personality. But in his smile, a little. The few wry grins she'd seen from the chief bore a vague similarity to his son's lopsided ones. And their noses had the same shape, she thought after a moment of concentration. Hiccup's hair was a little browner. But still, she remembered the red that glimmered under sunbeams.

Her heart gave a hard squeeze, and Astrid decided to blame it on her workout instead of the thought of Hiccup in the sunlight. With a growl of aggravation, she slowed to a stop and unstrapped her axe from her back. She chucked it at the first tree trunk her eyes landed on. It stuck several inches deep and made a sharp crack.

She wasn't upset. With a snarl and a foot planted against the bark, she yanked her weapon free and prepared to hit the slice it had left behind. After a few paces backwards, she narrowed her gaze and heaved the axe again. Leaves shook loose from the tree upon impact, and she smacked one that fell near her face.

She wasn't.

!

"I think I'd ride a dragon," Tuffnut sighed thoughtfully, stretching his legs out and leaning back on his forearms.

The teens were perched on one of the higher cliffs of Berk, one that overlooked the village and gave them a clear view of the sun setting over the ocean. Fishlegs had his back pressed to the stone wall, as far from the hundred-foot drop as possible. The twins had positioned themselves on either side of Snotlout, who had his elbow resting on one knee, and Astrid sat with one leg hanging completely over the edge. Beneath them, the rest of the villagers were wrapping up a long day of work, most filtering towards the Great Hall for dinner, others heading to their own homes.

The brunette of the group gave Tuff a curled lip. "_Why_"

"I dunno." He shrugged and pulled at the grass beneath him. "I think it'd be cool to see how long I could stay on."

"The Night Fury had a saddle," his sister noted, and Astrid's eyes flickered to Fishlegs. There was a tight, secret smile on his mouth. "Wouldn't be hard to stay on with one of those."

"They were really tame, y'know." Tuff lifted his eyes to the swirl of color in the clouds. "I mean, they obviously weren't best friends, but at least they didn't eat anybody." With a pensive nod, he added, "I mean, they could have eaten somebody."

"There's no such thing as a tame dragon," Snotlout sneered. He shifted so that he was sitting up and rubbed his shoulder. It was an old wound of his, where he'd been bludgeoned by a Gronkle's tail. It had yielded a sick bruise, but no scar, so it had always been more of a nuisance than a point of pride for him after the discoloring faded. "The Terrors are smaller than the sheep, and they still cause all sorts of trouble."

"Well obviously there is, or those dragons would have attacked." Ruffnut glared at her fingernails as she picked them clean of dirt.

"And then, again- saddle. Night Fury. Do the math."

Astrid wondered what they'd have to say if they knew that saddle had been made in Berk's forge, by one of the people sitting among them. "I don't think you can tame a dragon," she spoke up, and she felt eyes turn her way. "But I think you could get them to trust you. If you tried."

"Me too." The group's gaze moved again, this time to Fishlegs. The blonde shrugged and passed a glance back at Astrid. A cord of camaraderie struck between them, and for a moment, the buzzing of secrets in her head dipped below a deafening volume. "The dragons don't try and hurt Astrid when she feeds them. They just growl and wait."

Except for the Nadder, she thought to herself. Lips tilting wryly, she thought of the way the sky-blue dragon would wag her tail and try to trade nuzzles for fish. Feeding the dragons had become an evening time chore, since the Nadder kept getting so close to blowing her cover. It reminded her that she needed to run by the docks before the fishing boats finished unloading their day's catches. The fishermen always frowned at her when she came for the dragons' fish. It almost felt like taking food straight from the villagers' mouths.

"Seriously?" The twins blurted the word simultaneously and watched him with wide gazes. "That's weird," Ruffnut spoke over her brother as he remarked, "That's sweet."

"That's because they've been in cages for months," Snotlout argued, gesturing vaguely towards the kill ring. The wiring of the cage set jagged shadows across the water it neighbored. "Get em out in the arena and I bet they'll try and tear you to pieces."

This was her chance, she thought. The dark mood she'd been in all day lifted like a curtain at the thought of the opportunity to change their minds. All she had to do was take them down right now and show them how gentle the Nadder could be. Fishlegs was on her side, and when Hiccup- if Hiccup- came back, he could show off his dragon calming skills. It would be easy now.

But the thought of exposing the Nadder suddenly shot a spear of anxiety straight through her. Earn their trust, Hiccup had said during their flight. Bringing other Vikings to her cage in the night didn't sound like something the Nadder would particularly like. Astrid pressed her lips into a thin line and cut her gaze back over the glittering ocean.

"I think you're wrong," she sighed, and that was all. She slanted her shoulder at the exact angle she knew would tell the group that she was done with the conversation.

It was quiet for a minute, but then Ruffnut switched subjects. "Their pants were kinda tight, don't you think?"

Astrid's head whipped around to give her a half-incredulous, half-baffled glare. She didn't have to comment on the odd topic, though, because Fishlegs blurted- "I was more focused on the giant, lethal dragons."

"The dude had to be young." She continued, unfazed. Her eyes were a little distant, dreamy despite the looks she was receiving. "Kinda skinny. But broad shoulders. Good junk."

"Ruff!" The only other female among them turned red and swung her leg over the ledge. "How do you-"

"Tight pants!" she repeated, a hand thrown out as if to say, duh. "The chick had some weird armor up top, but she looked kinda stacked. I bet they're a couple."

The more she spoke, the wider Astrid's eyes grew. It wasn't the thought of Valka's breasts that made her indignant so much as the thought of Ruff looking at their crotches. "Out of everything that happened last night, that's what you were worried about?"

"I'm very observant," was the girl's only defense.

The blonde tried to stifle the strange sense of disturbed annoyance that boiled in her chest. There was no reason for her friend's interest in Hiccup's body to perturb her. She certainly had no claim on him.

Her mind's eye wandered to the thought of the young man's pants. Were they that tight? She'd never noticed, but on a second thought, she realized that they did cut rather close. Still, she'd never thought about the bulge between his slender hips, never stolen self-indulging glances at what might hide beneath. Even when he'd been naked in her room. She'd had plenty of chances then. Though, she wouldn't lie and say she hadn't given that particular area a thought or two while his chest was pressed to hers the night before.

Her fingers itched to rise to her mouth, to trace the sparks that he'd left in the creases of her lips. She'd felt his weight above her, the warmth of his arms encasing her as he learned how human mates showed affection. Parts of her wanted him too much. Wanted his hands untangling her braid, wanted his skin against hers, wanted to peer into him and understand all the things he thought about. She'd flown, in more ways than one, and for a few hours she'd been like a dragon. Free to choose, if just for a little while.

Still. Maybe it was ridiculous of her to think that he'd thought as much of it as she had. He didn't know the implications behind it, of course, didn't know how important such a thing would be to her. To him, it was probably as innocent as touching her hair or holding her hand- those other forbidden things that seemed like nothing to him.

But- she thought to herself as she recalled the wet heat of his tongue sliding along her skin- it was something to her. Her fingers clenched into a fist, and she found her face dropping. To glare at Ruffnut, she had to stare past Snotlout, and that was something she couldn't do quite yet. He'd been keeping his distance, giving her the space she'd had to fight to earn. But every now and then she'd catch her intended looking at her out of the corner of his eye with a sort of peace he never had before she kissed him.

She wished he wouldn't. The kiss she'd pressed so recklessly against his lips hadn't been an encouragement or a sign of good faith, but it seemed that was how he'd interpreted it. It won her some time to

think for herself, but when she thought about the fact that she'd had her first _and _second kiss in one night- with two different men- she was mortified. A pang of guilt had struck her when she realized she'd forgotten all about Snotlout until after Hiccup had disappeared.

Astrid sucked her lower lip into her mouth. The last rays of the sun sparkled off of the black ocean. Two kisses. Two men. One training to be chief, the other the rightful heir. One a dragon killer, the other a dragon rider. One safe and lukewarm. One a flying thunderstorm.

"Do you think they'll be back?"

Astrid didn't completely hear the question at first, but then she realized that it was Fishlegs' voice that asked it. She lifted her head and caught his gaze. "Hmm?"

"I said 'do you think they'll be back'?" He pulled aside his helmet for a moment to run his fingers through his limp blonde hair and then secured it back in place. "Or do you think they're gone for good?"

She felt the group's eyes on her. Though they had no real reason to suspect her of anything, she couldn't help but feel like she was drawing more of their attention than she should. Shrugging him off as if she couldn't be bothered, she pushed to her feet. "Who knows? Depends on if they found what they came for."

A little flicker of hope beneath her stress prayed that they hadn't.

!

The Monstrous Nightmare nearly set her on fire when she opened his cage, but after swallowing down her terror and holding her hand out towards the blistering heat, the flames went down. He was the largest and most intimidating of the dragons they kept, and therefore the last she'd wanted to befriend. But after flying on Toothless, she'd found a new faith. If Hiccup's mother could find a friend in a dragon as fearsome as Cloudjumper, then perhaps she could calm the Nightmare enough to feed it.

"There you go," she whispered, keeping her hand outstretched as his blazing slowly simmered. Flames still licked at his crown and claws, but the longer she waited, the more curiously he watched her. When she dropped her arm and slowly went for his bucket of fish, he only exhaled a stream of black smoke. "Dragons that don't eat me get extra food. Doesn't that sound nice?"

After befriendng the Nadder, she'd tried the Terrible Terror. It had been a vicious little thing at first, but once it saw the guppies in her hands, it curled up like a kitten at her side. Then after it was the Gronkle. She'd needed a few minutes of outrunning it to gather up the courage to stand still, but once she did, the beast had all but licked her hands clean. The Zippleback was just scary. Not hard. She'd stood in a cloud of noxious gas, holding a bucket of fish above her head with trembling arms. They ate, and when the gas cleared, she found two blinking dragon heads staring down at her.

So the Nightmare was the only one she'd still been feeding through the door slots. But it was time. Too long she'd tiptoed past his little prison as he snarled and banged and thrashed in his cage.

Her skin felt too warm as she carried the bucket forward, sweat beading on the back of her neck. The Nightmare's pen seemed to shimmer with the heat it gave off, and it was more humid than any summer day Astrid could ever remember experiencing on Berk. Breathing in the air was like putting her face directly in front of the hearth.

"Dinner time," she murmured, forcing the weight from her legs to dissipate so she could approach the fierce dragon. It was one like this that had nearly burned her to a crisp. She wasn't so much a fan of fire anymore.

The Nightmare's pupils narrowed and widened with uncertainty, and he shifted his weight as she came closer. He watched the gift that she set down in front of him, taking a wary sniff. Then with a heart-stoppingly quick movement, he slashed the bucket so that it fell over. Fish spilled across the stone floor, and he ate quickly and quietly. Astrid thought about waiting until he was finished to let him out to stretch his legs like she did for the others, but she decided it was better to be overly cautious. If he got angry at her, she'd have to explain why she let him out to begin with after someone heard her screams and came running.

So she silently picked up the empty bucket as he ate and backed out of the cage. He hardly looked up at her to watch her crank his door closed once more. After she released the lever and wiped the sweat from her forehead, she half-smiled at the cage with a sense of pride. He wasn't exactly begging for belly rubs like Toothless, but at least he hadn't tried to take a snap at her.

Feeding time for the Nadder was a much more pleasant task. The dragon nearly tackled Astrid as she burst from her cage, pinning the girl under her claw and licking her face with enthusiasm. She could only laugh, dodging the slimy saliva and throwing the bucket of fish to the side. It was the only thing that would distract the Nadder long enough for her to get her footing again.

They played catch with slimy cod and a hushed version of wrestling. The Nadder liked to try and catch Astrid in her wings and hold her tight to her chest. She also liked her baths, cooing and purring as the blonde ran a wet cloth over her scales and a hard-bristled brush over her horns. It was soothing to both of them- the Nadder had the physical pleasure of being fawned over, and Astrid got the relief of being able to murmur all her anxieties to someone who wouldn't judge.

"If only everyone was as good of a listener as you," she sighed, one corner of her mouth tugging upwards as the dragon sniffed at her braid. The Nadder helped her relax. Helped her decompress. Helped her forget.

Astrid realized she owed her something in return.

Her mouth set with determination as she rose from her kneeling position and threw the rag in her hand over to the stack of empty fish buckets. The Nadder tilted her head at her, first one way and

then the other.

"Stay there," she instructed firmly, holding her hands out and giving the dragon a stern expression. Then she backed towards the entrance to the kill ring. Her heart started a nervous rhythm in her throat, and she had to swallow down the voice of reason that wanted to stop her. She hesitated when she wrapped her hands around the crank to the heavy gate, but then she bit her lip and began to roll the door open. Out of her peripheral, she could see the Nadder growing restless at the sight of escape, but for all the tail twitching and excited chirping, she stayed where she sat.

"Okay," Astrid whispered, standing in front of the door to block the exit. "Come here. Come to me."

The Nadder wasted no time. She jumped to her clawed feet and ran with a shocking speed to the girl's side.

Astrid wet her lips and ran her eyes over the dragon's spine. No saddle. Nothing to hold onto but a row of mace-sharp horns. Valka hadn't been using a saddle, she recalled, and Hiccup had never seen one until Fishlegs made his. It would be as if she was one of them. Pointing down at the floor she said, "Can- can you get a little lower for me?"

With a happy trill, the Nadder crouched. She wiggled and shifted as Astrid tried to get a grip on her neck, making the blonde huff with frustration. Finally, the shield maiden frowned and used a firm hand to grip the lowest horn at the base of the dragon's head. Then she was using her upper body strength to pull herself up and swing her leg over the Nadder's neck.

Apprehension instantly gripped her. The idea seemed much more sane from the ground. Even just a few feet off of it, she felt unsteady and afraid. But she didn't have a chance to second guess herself- as soon as she had her thighs pressed firmly to either side of the Nadder, the dragon took off running. She sprinted through the tunnel leading out of the kill ring and took flight before they were even completely free.

Astrid had to resist the urge to scream as the dragon took her up, up, up. There was no more wild boy to hold onto. No assurance that the Nadder would take her back. It was the girl, the dragon, and the wind on her face.

And as her panic turned to a laugh of hysterical relief, Astrid decided that flying could become a terrible addiction.

14. Chapter 14

****Chapter Fourteen.****

Astrid was spoiled by flying with Hiccup. Not only was simply holding onto the Nadder without a saddle an extremely painful task for her leg muscles, her fingers quickly went numb on the dragon's horns. Her inner thighs were rubbing raw from the rough scales on either side, and without someone sitting in front of her, she took the full blast of the wind in her face. She was shivering and a little damp from the dragon's frolics through the frigid clouds. Taking the Nadder for a

flight was quite possibly the stupidest thing she'd done since deciding to befriend the feral dragon boy.

But it was also the most exhilarating.

It was something about the terror that made her feel like a bird escaped from its cage. What were responsibilities, obligations, honor, when one was holding on for dear life? In the moments where they cut through the dark evening sky, she could think of nothing else but the joy of freedom. She knew that all too soon the cage door would close again, but for the moment, not a Viking on Berk could reach her.

"We have to go back," she forced herself to tell the Nadder through chattering teeth. Though she couldn't be sure how long it had been since they'd left the ground, she could tell that the dragon was getting tired, and so was she. Her hands flexed on the dragon's horns, feeling the cold ache in her knuckles. She'd have to stop herself from sticking them in the Nightmare's pen to warm them up when she got back.

...If she got back.

"I think it's that way," she called over the wind, trying to lean to the left to encourage the Nadder to turn. But she only trilled in response and beat her wings harder towards the ominous gray clouds ahead.

The nerves that had seized her when they first took off suddenly returned. Could she really trust this beast, who she'd allowed to be kept in a cage for who knows how long? Sure, she was sweet and affectionate when they were on Astrid's turf, but now the Nadder was in charge. Who was to say she wasn't taking the girl to her nest to devour her whole?

No, she told herself, shaking her head. _Trust her. Trust Hiccup._ If she was going to stand in front of her village and try to convince them that dragons could be good and safe, then she was going to have to start believing it too.

Ahead, a streak of lightning flashed through the dark cloud formation.

"C'mon girl," she tried again, giving the Nadder a firmer nudge with her knees. "We need to go the other way." Astrid tried not to let her uncertainty show in her voice, but with the wispy cover that had moved in, there was no way to see the stars, to know which direction she was being taken. She wasn't entirely sure where they were, only that they were somewhere over the water.

The storm clouds were approaching too quickly. She was sure that she'd be struck down by lightning, or thrown off by the winds. There was a thick charge gathering in the air that made her hair stand up on the back of her neck and every breath smell metallic. With a little noise of apprehension, she tugged at the dragon's horns in one last attempt to redirect her. The Nadder flew ahead at a sprint, her wings working madly through the breeze.

"Please!" she insisted, her eyes growing wide as thunder rumbled and another blaze of light lit the clouds. "We can't go this way!"

Her pleading fell on deaf ears. The Nadder chirped loudly, and then just before they crashed through the front, the dragon abruptly reared up. The momentum tore Astrid's hands from her horns. For a brief moment, she felt suspended in the air, and then the Nadder disappeared from beneath her. And she was falling.

The girl screamed as wind roared in her ears, but just as quickly as she'd been thrown off, she was suddenly slammed into by a huge, scaly warmth. The Nadder's wings enfolded her, and she was pressed close to the dragon's chest. It was just as it was when they play wrestled- Astrid could feel a heavy, solid heartbeat against her shoulder, and her cheek was pressed hard against the Nadder's sharp breast bone. And they were spinning. The speed of it almost made her nauseous, and she could hear the cracking of thunder outside her warm cocoon. She could tell that they were angled downwards, descending at a dangerous rate, but the dragon held her tight.

Just when Astrid was sure the Nadder was going to barrel them straight into the black, frigid waters of the ocean, she was thrown from the safety of her wings. Her stomach rose into her throat, and then knife-like claws grabbed her upper arms with an impossible gentleness. She cried out, but the Nadder didn't let go, and Astrid dangled high above the choppy waves.

Her head spun, but when the blonde's eyes adjusted again, she was greeted by the welcome sight of Berk's lights in the distance. She checked over her shoulder- the menacing storm clouds were behind them, and they'd made it safely through. Not only that- they'd beaten the storm. Trails of milky gray clouds twisted out from where they'd burst free.

She gave a hysterical little laugh, glancing up at the Nadder. "Brave, aren't you?" she shouted, her heart humming like the frantic buzz of a fly's wings. She was still waiting for her stomach to catch up with the rest of her body. "Trying to out-fly a storm!"

The Nadder peeked down, giving her an expression that seemed almost like a smile. Astrid had to shake her head in disbelief, letting her eyes close as she sighed with relief. Home wasn't far. The Nadder had kept her safe after all. The adrenaline of her little trick left a pleasant buzz traveling through her veins, a delirious kind of excitement.

They came upon Berk just as Astrid's shoulders were beginning to get sore. With a nod of her head, she directed the dragon around the back of the island. There were no new lights on, no alarm blaring, so obviously her escape had gone unnoticed. The delicious deviousness of her stolen flight made it difficult to hold back a grin. With a flourish and a somersault under the village's bridge, the Nadder made one last circle around the kill ring and then set Astrid safely in front of the entrance.

"Thank you," she giggled as the dragon came to land next to her. The Nadder nuzzled her affectionately, mussing her braid with her quick, steaming breaths. For a moment, Astrid just waited for the feeling to return to her legs, for the feeling of solidarity to return to the ground below. She petted the dragon's snout, murmuring encouragements and soft words. But her high spirits quickly sank. Her smile fell as she rubbed her face against the Nadder's.

"I don't want to put you back in there," she whispered, unable to meet her warm gaze. "I wish I didn't have to lock you up like that."

Astrid felt despair take root in her chest, thinking about how the dragon had willingly returned her to her home. She must have known that going back to the island would mean going back to the cage, and still she came. Wrapping her arms around the dragon's neck, she stood on her tiptoes to give her a tight hug. "This isn't fair," she sighed, and then pulled away.

She would have to stage an escape.

Taking a few steps back, Astrid waved her arms at the Nadder. "Shoo! Get out of here! Go!"

The dragon only tilted her head and shifted uncomfortably on her feet. She took a step forward and nipped at Astrid's shirt, obviously wanting more nuzzles, but the girl pulled away.

"No!" she scolded firmly, trying to keep her voice firm without raising it too loudly. She pushed at the Nadder's shoulder. "This is the only chance you'll get, so _go_!"

In reply, the dragon sneezed at her shoving hands. She shook with what looked like indignation and stretched out her wings. For a moment, Astrid thought she was preparing to fly away, and relief washed over her, but then the Nadder settled back again. She was about to open her mouth to try and shoo her once more when the dragon walked straight into the arena and directly to her pen.

"You dumb dragon!" she hissed, stomping into the kill ring. She gestured towards the exit. "Can't you figure it out? You can _leave_! I'll cover for you."

The Nadder settled deeper into the cage, scrabbling in the shadows for a bone Astrid had given her to chew. She began gnawing at the large yak femur, pretending not to hear the shield maiden's frustration.

"Son of a rat-eating-" She cut herself off, rubbing her hands over her face and sighing. She was wet and cold and ached all over, but she didn't want to leave. It didn't feel right leaving the Nadder in the kill ring, just like it hadn't felt right to let Toothless remain flightless. But it was late, and the dragon was stubborn. And if they were right about an evil dragon being the source of all the dragon attacks, maybe it was safer for the Nadder where she was.

Astrid shook her head and muttered under her breath. With a last, loving pat, and a whisper goodnight, she went to the lever and slowly let down the door to the pen. None of the dragons paced or hissed or banged at their confines now. It was quiet, save for the sound of teeth on yak bone.

She gathered her things in silence, stacking the fish buckets and stowing the supplies beneath the rack of weapons stored up front. After she was strapping her axe behind her, readying to leave, she heard the scrape of boots on stone.

"Who's there?" she called out, whipping around to face the entrance.

Out of the shadows, faces dumbstruck, Ruffnut and Tuffnut slowly walked into the ring. In his hand, Tuff held his mace. Ruff's spear was tightly gripped in hers. They both stared at her with wide eyes and open mouths. Astrid's heart sank into her stomach.

"No kidding," Ruff said first. "You actually tamed them."

Astrid shot a panicked glance over her shoulder at the Nadder's cage. Then she looked back at the twins. She itched to draw the weapon she had just put away, but instinct told her she needed to do everything in her power to not appear to be the enemy. "What are you guys doing here?" she asked, a little more acid in her voice than was wise. "You're supposed to be in bed."

Tuffnut lifted his other hand- he carried several small fish on a hook. "We wanted to see if Fishlegs was right. If they'd eat the fish or Ruffnut first." The awe didn't fade from their faces, but neither did the look of faint suspicion.

Astrid resisted the urge to grit her teeth. "They behave better if I let them out for a little while every now and then," she lied. Her fingers flexed and clenched at her sides, half out of nervousness and half to encourage some warmth back into them. She couldn't afford to be ham-handed if either of the twins started swinging at her. "They always go back in their pens before I leave."

The two exchanged a glance.

"That didn't look like you were telling it to go back inside," Ruff challenged slowly.

"It looked a lot like you were trying to get it to leave." Tuff raised a brow at her, as if expecting an explanation.

"You saw wrong," Astrid told them with a hard edge to her voice. "I was just trying to get it away from me."

The twins shook their heads simultaneously.

"Nah."

"Nope."

She decided to switch tactics. Giving them her most fearsome scowl, she drew her axe and spun it expertly in her hand. "I'm telling you," she growled, letting the moonlight glint off the sharp blade. "You saw wrong." A disturbed feeling swirled in her gut. What was she doing? Drawing a weapon against Vikings? For a dragon? The guilt alone made her want to vomit, but she didn't ease up on her tight grip.

"Easy there, slice-happy." Tuffnut put his hands up in front of him in defense. "You don't see us running to the chief, do you?"

Astrid let her hands dance in another skillful maneuver along the weapon's handle. "This isn't a game, you guys. This is my life." She pointed the axe in the general direction of Stoick the Vast's

home. "If you let it slip to anybody what you think you saw," Her consonants were hard and bitten off, as if she was trying to channel her own inner dragon. "I swear on Odin's missing eye, I'll take you down with me."

The brother and sister looked at each other for a long moment, and then Ruffnut took a step forward. "Astrid. We're not gonna tell." Her expression was solemn and serious. "Does Snotlout know?"

"No." Her glare was icy. "You can't tell him, either. You can't tell anybody."

"We won't," Tuffnut answered with a nod. "We'll keep your secret."

Astrid pressed her mouth into a thin, unhappy line. The more people that knew she was acting strange, the more chance she and Hiccup had of getting caught before they had proof of the dragon queen. They couldn't afford to be discovered without some sort of negotiating chip. The village's safety was that chip, and as long as they knew that what they were doing could protect instead of harm, they could keep the dragons and the villagers safe. If anyone thought it was just a ploy, and that she and Hiccup were working together to side with the dragons, well- it wouldn't end prettily.

"One thing," Ruffnut began, holding up a single finger. She glanced back at her brother before turning back to Astrid.

She gave her a terse nod to continue.

The other girl grinned. "Can we feed 'em?"

****! ****

She didn't hear him come in. She should have- the window creaked when it was pushed open, and her nerves had been rubbed raw by her near-death experience with the Nadder and her encounter with the twins. But she never heard the shutters move, never heard the wind come in. She didn't hear his footsteps on the floor or the rustling of furs. He never made a sound.

She could feel him, though. At one moment during the night, she simply opened her eyes and knew he was there. Her sleep was dreamless, or maybe she'd never been asleep at all, but when she rolled over and sat up on her elbow, he was there beside her bed.

Hiccup had found the furs from the few nights past and curled up in them, just like he had the last time he slept on her floor. This time, though, he wasn't pressed far against the wall, but settled right next to where she lay. His mask was discarded and resting a few feet away. His staff was propped against her window pane. The dark was thick and opaque, but she could just barely make out the angles of his face, the softness of his hair.

Astrid reached down, brushing her fingertips over his crown and running her fingers through his bangs. The way he breathed evenly through his barely parted lips, she could tell he was sleeping deeply.

He was back. He was safe. She wondered how long he'd been flying for—he'd said that his home with his mother was a day's flight away, but had he flown for that long nonstop? She wondered if he'd eaten, if things with his mom had gone alright. Half of her wanted to whisper his name, to shake him awake, but she just ran her fingers along his forehead and sighed. She'd hear the story from him soon enough, and she needed her own sleep.

So she buried herself back beneath her covers and readjusted her pillow so that she could see him once the morning broke. And then she felt one of her quiet fears scattering like dust out the window.

****! ****

Dawn came too soon. She felt the bed shift as someone lifted their weight onto it, felt him crawling up her body. He didn't settle his weight on top of her, as she expected, but instead waited, holding himself up by his arms. Hiccup lowered his face to hers, pressing his nose into her hair and inhaling deeply. It was the tickling sensation of strands fluttering at her ear that forced her to stir.

"You're lucky I didn't sleep with my axe under my pillow," she mumbled, not opening her eyes. "You're getting a little too brave."

His breathy chuckle was more reviving than the sounds of birds chirping outside. "I have to go," he whispered, pressing his forehead against hers. "Is the cove safe? Does anyone know about me and Toothless?"

Her lips formed a little pout of their own volition, and she rolled to her back. Blinking up into the still dim hours of morning, she blearily found his face above her. "Yes. And no. But everyone's on their guard, so you'll have to be careful flying around the island."

Hiccup gave a short nod, but didn't move. His braid slipped over his shoulder and brushed against her jaw.

"Did you talk to your mom?" she murmured, suddenly remembering the intimidating rider and her four-winged dragon. "Is she mad at you?"

Wincing, he leaned back so that he was almost sitting on her thighs. "She's not happy with my choices," he answered quietly. "I didn't stay long, or explain a lot. I knew I needed to be here."

Astrid frowned, wondering if the two had argued or exchanged harsh words. The aggressive body language she'd seen from them the night he left certainly pointed to a heated conversation. She made a mental note to ask him about their strange, wordless language at another time. "Do you think she'll come back?"

"No." That answer, at least, was firm. Hiccup shook his head, examining her face instead of meeting her gaze. He wrapped a lock that had come loose from her braid around his finger. "I told her I didn't want her following me. She more or less implied that I was flying off to my death."

Astrid's exhale came quicker than she meant for it to. Her eyes cut away, and she felt a weight on her chest that had nothing to do with the young man above her. If Stoick the Vast was Hiccup's father, and Hiccup was the rightful heir to Berk, then his safety was almost guaranteed. She, on the other hand, was from a family of no particularly grand means, and she lived with the dark shadow of her uncle's dishonor over her head. At worst, Hiccup would be banished. At best, she would probably be imprisoned for the rest of her life with the dragons. That would be if she managed to keep her life.

"Hiccup, a couple of things happened while you were with your mom." Sleep still made her voice thick, and she swallowed in an attempt to clear it. She drew her arms out from beneath her furs and curled her fingers around his wrists like she had just before they kissed. Just the reminder of it, the thought of being caught in the same position- it made her thoughts wander to more heated places.

Something flashed in his eyes, a wariness. He drew back again, and she tightened her grip on his wrists so that he wouldn't pull away. "Bad things?"

Astrid licked her lips. "Yes and no." She decided to tell him about the twins first, about her flight with the Nadder, and how they'd discovered her afterwards. "I don't like it," she told him, "Because I feel like the more people who know something's up, the more likely something will slip. But at the same time, it can't hurt to have more people on our side for when we talk to the village."

He nodded, clearly in agreement. "The more people who get to see that the dragons are safe, the better chance we have."

There was a slight relief that rose at his words, just knowing they were on the same page. But it wasn't nearly enough to quell the anxiety she still carried in her chest. "Also, I've been doing some digging." Her thumbs brushed back and forth across the soft skin of his forearms, as if the little motions could soften the blow of her news. For a few seconds, she could only try and gather her thoughts. "I found out who your father is."

She'd expected a myriad of emotions- excitement, nervousness, maybe even irritation. Hiccup's eyes widened at her words, and his breath rushed from her lungs like he'd been punched in the gut. His arms seemed to weaken as he twisted off of her, rolling to his side. He scanned the ceiling, and an expression of twisted confusion pulled at his features. "He's alive?"

"Yeah." Astrid turned so that she could face him, though she was suddenly too nervous to touch him. "I really can't believe I didn't figure it out sooner. All this time, I thought-"

"Wait," he breathed, shutting his eyes and shaking his head. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know yet."

She furrowed her brow and examined his face. "Hiccup, this is what you came here for." The light outside was getting brighter, a reminder that he still had to escape from her window without being seen. "Isn't it?"

Hiccup glanced over at her, apprehension tight in his gaze. "Yes, but

I-" He cut off, hiding his eyes behind his palms for a second before taking a deep breath. "I was out there with my mom, and Toothless, and Cloudjumper. And your whole village was watching. Glaring. Hating us." For a moment, his lips seemed to form words he couldn't voice. "If my dad is one of them, then he probably hates me too."

Astrid wanted to take his face in her hands, but for some reason, in the few minutes that he'd been in her bed, touching him suddenly seemed strange again. "I know him," she informed him softly. "He's... he's a good man."

"But he hates the dragons, doesn't he?" He pinned her under a hard gaze, sitting up. "He's a dragon-killer, right?"

She didn't say anything. But that was enough for him. He nodded, as if it was what he expected.

"Are you mad at me?" she was almost too afraid to ask. "For finding out before you?" After a thought, she added, "Or because I'm a dragon-killer too?"

His expression softened, the agitation seeming to melt from his posture. He pressed his lips into a tight line and shook his head. "You're not a dragon-killer, Astrid. Not anymore."

She didn't think that after a lifetime of being at war with the dragons, she'd be so relieved to hear him say those words. Still, the thought didn't dissipate like she'd hoped. The guilt had already begun settling long ago, and she was starting to feel the weight of it whenever she thought of the dragons that had fallen at her feet. She'd killed dozens, probably. She'd almost killed the Nadder. Her little Stormfly.

"If you don't want to know, I won't push it," she said, sitting up and wrapping her arms around her knees. "But if something happens, and I think your life depends on it, I'm going to say something."

Hiccup raised a brow at her. "My life?"

"It could happen," she muttered. It still had yet to sink in that the heir to the throne of Berk was lying next to her. She tried to picture Stoick leading him around the village the way he did with Snotlout, showing him the ropes and forcing him to tag along to meetings. If his identity was the only card she had to keep him safe, she'd play it.

"Okay." She could tell by the flatness in his voice that he wasn't happy, and his eyes looked distracted in the faint light of dawn. He glanced over her shoulder, towards the window. "I have to go."

"Yeah," she nodded. She wanted him to stay, even for just a few minutes longer, just so she could relocate the courage to reach out and touch him. They still needed to talk about their kiss. She'd hoped she wouldn't have to be the one to bring it up.

But the sky was getting lighter with every heartbeat. It shouldn't have caught her notice that when he climbed off her bed and gathered his things, he didn't do so in his usual crawl. It shouldn't have

been important that he walked to her window standing upright. But did. And it was.

15. Chapter 15

It was a waiting game. Astrid had never thought she'd see the day when she'd stare at the horizon and hope to see a swarm of dragons heading for Berk, but it came. Until that moment, every minute she spent sneaking around the village, taking care of the dragons, disappearing into the woods- she risked being discovered. Accused. Sentenced. It was becoming dangerous, especially with the odd glances she sometimes got from Gobber or Stoick, or the way someone's eyes lingered on her as she melted into the treeline.

Fortunately, she had a wild boy and his dragon to wait it out with.

"But I don't understand why." Hiccup stretched his arm across his body, holding the strip of dried meat in his hand out of Toothless' reach. The Night Fury's head followed, even as his rider used his feet to hold him back. Despite Toothless' determination, Hiccup seemed unfazed. He was probably used to the behavior, growing up around dragons.

"Me neither," Astrid shrugged. She gnawed absently at her own bite of jerky and shook her head. The cold was gripping her hard, and she held her arms tight around herself. "That's how it is, though. You don't run around naked, and you don't wear your hair loose."

"It makes no sense." He used his free hand to shove at Toothless' nose and then quickly threw the last of his lunch into his mouth. Then he was speaking with his mouth full, a humorous reminder of the several conversations they'd had on manners. "What if most of your hair burned off in a fire and it was too short to braid?"

"That's happened." When his brows shot up, she elaborated. "Not to me. To one of the women in the village. She covered her hair until it grew back out."

He'd been in her personal space again, though she made none of her usual protests. While he admitted to seeing other blonde-haired people around the village, hers was a constant source of fascination to him. He liked tracing his fingers along the lines of her plait, and she'd started to design more and more complicated styles just to see his face brighten. But that morning, just a couple days after his return, he'd reached for the cord tying her braid back. She'd jumped and hit him reflexively. The blow to his gut had stolen his breath and sent him to the ground. It was technically the second time he'd attempted untying her hair, but the first had been some time after their first meeting. He'd probably assumed her aggression was over being touched at all, and that it was safe now that she was used to it. To explain her violent reaction, she'd told him how Viking women wore their hair in braids at all times. It confused him, to say the least.

"Does your mom not braid her hair?" she asked as she nibbled at the edge of her snack. Her breath puffed around her in steamy mists, visible in the chilly air. "Does she keep it short?"

"No, she braids it." Hiccup's expression was thoughtful, as if it'd never occurred to him to consider his mother's hairstyle. "But she's left it loose around me and the dragons before."

With a snort, the girl shook her head and pushed her bangs away from her eyes. "The dragons don't really count. Like the kisses. And she's your mom- family isn't so bad."

"If dragons don't count, then I shouldn't count."

She answered his statement with a flat look. "You're not a dragon, Hiccup."

"Well, I'm not a Viking," he argued. "Tying your hair back is a Viking rule, so it shouldn't apply to me."

Tilting her head at him, she evaluated him curiously. "You are a Viking, Hiccup. By birth." And more, even, though he'd chosen not to know that yet. His gaze wandered, as if he wanted to pretend he hadn't heard her. "But still. You're a man. You can take this down any time you want." She gave his braid a gentle yank.

"I don't care about my hair. I want to see your hair." He drew closer, kneeling over her. His cloak brushed over her arms as he took the tail of her plait and brushed it across his palm. The warmth of him was like a fire crackling in the hearth, providing a comforting heat. Now that Hiccup's food was gone, Toothless also drew near, nuzzling the side of her left exposed by his rider's shadow. With a sigh, she surrendered the last of her snack to the persistent dragon and resisted pulling Hiccup close.

He was a never ending list of questions. If he wasn't asking about her hair or her attire, it was about the village's day-to-day happenings. He wanted to know why they gathered in the Great Hall after a long day. He wanted to know why they built houses when there were perfectly good caves. He wanted her to explain how the forge worked, and what sort of things could be made there. His curiosity was insatiable, his appetite for information voracious.

Astrid glanced up at him, examining his pouting expression from beneath her lashes. It felt inexplicably good to have him near. Ever since he'd returned from his argument with his mother, there had been a tangible space between them. From what he'd told her, he'd hardly stuck around to exchange words, but he wasn't exactly forthcoming with details.

"She couldn't if she tried," he'd told her when she'd asked whether Valka had attempted to stop him from coming back. "I'm an adult."

"A little bit," he'd answered when she'd inquired whether she'd come up in their conversation.

"No." His scowl had been deep when she dared to ask if his mom's feelings had changed any. "If anything, she's more convinced that I shouldn't be here."

She wondered if Valka had said something to discourage him from interacting with her. Or if it had simply been the village's reaction to them that set Hiccup on edge. Whatever it was, he'd been nothing but innocent with her, not even mentioning the kiss they'd shared

after her first flight. On that cliff, he'd looked at her like he might eat her alive. But since his return, his behavior had returned to a simple disregard of personal space, without the subtle undertones of desire.

Her eyes dropped to his lips, followed the line of his mouth. Not for the first time, she recalled the firm give of it against her own. She remembered the way his chest had pressed down above her and the tight grip of his hand on the back of her neck. Though she hadn't allowed herself to think on it while he'd been gone, she wondered how much she would have taught him about human mating if they hadn't been interrupted.

Astrid swallowed down the apprehension in her throat. She'd stood weaponless before dragons who wanted her blood. She could have a conversation with one human man.

"Are we going to talk about it?" Clearing her throat, she attempted to make the question sound casual. At the hitch in her voice, though, Hiccup's eyes cut to hers, and a deep furrow appeared in his brow.

"About what?" His thumbs were still sliding over the maze of her braid, testing the sleek softness. He must have detected the blush she felt rising in her cheeks, because he dropped her hair and crouched back to evaluate her expression.

Frowning, she tried to stifle her irritation. "You know what I'm talking about," she growled.

He cocked his head at her. She had to tell herself that she did not want to scoot back against the rock wall and hide from his ever-curious gaze. "Pretend I don't. Illuminate me."

Illuminate. That was one of the words carved into his staff.

Astrid huffed, swiping a strand of hair behind her ear. Her fingers itched to tear the grass from the ground beneath them, just as an outlet for the violent tendencies brought on by her embarrassment. She looked away, half-watching Toothless chase a grasshopper along the lake's edge. "The kiss," she finally spat. Her restless hands decided to tug at her arm warmers instead of ravaging the defenseless grass. As if there was more than one she might be referring to, she added, "Before your mom showed."

A memory flashed in his eyes, the same one she'd been replaying whenever her mind wandered. The easiness in his face dropped into something like a wince, and he lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck. Now he was the one avoiding her gaze. "What about it?"

"You haven't said anything about it since it happened," she muttered.

"Neither have you."

"I thought I made my feelings clear enough," she snapped, regretting the words as soon as they passed her lips. If she wasn't bright red from the cold air, then her flushed cheeks could have finished out the job. She thought the way she'd dragged her tongue across his skin would be something he could understand- a translation of her

affections put into his own language. And then the meeting of their lips- she'd assumed that he knew the weight of it. What it meant. Maybe she'd spoken- or kissed- too soon.

Hiccup leaned back on the balls of his feet, breathing out a laugh that didn't sound at all humorous. "Oh. I'm sorry." He shook his head and tried an inauthentic smile. There was no crookedness to it, no sincerity. "I guess we can just pretend it didn't happen."

"I don't want to," she blurted, frowning in frustration. The mask he was trying cracked a little to reveal confusion in his expression, but she was already ranting. "I was happy flying with you. And then when I- I licked you, I thought you'd understand me. Understand what I wanted. Which is stupid, I guess, because most of the time I don't even know what that is." She rolled her eyes and continued, forcing herself to get it all out before he could interrupt and make her self-conscious again. "I wanted to lick you, Hiccup. Not because you're my friend the way Fishlegs is my friend, or because I'm grateful for what you're doing for Berk. I wanted to kiss you. Because that's something that human mates do, and being around you makes me want to do those things with you." He reached a hand out for her, but she batted it away. "I get that this is all new for you, and that I shouldn't expect you to understand things I don't even have the courage to say, but I don't want to pretend it didn't happen. Even if you're indifferent to me, or I'm just like another one of your dragon friends to you, I can't say the same anymore."

Astrid felt her heart thrumming with nervousness, her words tripping over each other as she attempted to spit them out. "I want you in ways I'm ashamed of, Hiccup. I was waiting for you to kiss me again, or just to say something about it. Because I thought we felt the same way. But even if your feelings for me are completely platonic, mine aren't."

Green eyes watched her, one brow raised. "Platonic?" he said slowly. The word was spoken low, with a hint of perplexity hanging off the edge. His eyes narrowed, and his lips moved as if to form his next question.

Of course. The gods were going to force her to lay her soul as bare as possible. "Platonic," she bit out, glaring at the ground between them. "It means you don't have any... mate-ish-"

"I know what platonic means," Hiccup interrupted, and then he was pulling her against him.

His mouth crashed down on hers, almost clumsy in an amateur way. Heat flared to life beneath her skin, sending the skipping stutter of her pulse into a sluggish surge. The night he'd disappeared, his hands had been still on the back of her neck, as if he was afraid to scare her away with any sudden movements. That reserve seemed to have left with him- he pressed her tightly to his body, raking down her back and around her waist. When his fingers dared beneath the hem of her shirt, she gasped against his lips, and he gripped the curve of her hip with a brevity she didn't expect.

"Hiccup?"

"You think my feelings are platonic?" he muttered incredulously, angling his chin so that he could kiss her deeper. Her attempt to

answer him was smothered by a wave of pleasure when his thumbnail scraped over a scar he'd found along her hipbone. Her tongue darted out to taste his bottom lip, and after a pause, he took it in his mouth and tangled it with his own. Despite the fact that he'd probably never seen or heard of this kind of kissing in his life, he took to it naturally.

He flooded her system with a heat that chased back the wintery chill. It was as if her humiliating little speech had been a challenge thrown at his feet. As if he had to prove that no matter how dark her thoughts became, his could go farther. It was comforting, in a bizarre way, but also incredibly exciting in its illicit nature.

Hiccup eased her back until she was laid out on the grass beneath him. It was almost like the position he'd first kissed her in, except this time he roughly nudged her knee aside and settled between her thighs. She tried not to think about the pleats of her skirt falling aside. His eyes flashed with desire, and he pressed his weight against her. A solid, burning throb met the forbidden warmth of her center. Her sharp inhale was drawn through her teeth, almost a hiss. Her body ached to arch into his arousal, even as her hips pulled back. It didn't deter him. Hiccup grabbed her wrist and pulled it between them. Astrid watched with wide eyes as he brought her hand to the bulge at his groin and pressed her palm against him. Flames licked down her arm and began to blaze in deeper, hungrier places. He twitched beneath her touch. "I've always wanted you," he breathed, his gaze intense. "Even when I was annoyed with you, or didn't trust you, I've always been in heat around you."

"In heat..." she murmured, noting even as her brain struggled through the haze of lust that he spoke in an animal's context. She should have been mortified by where he'd placed her hand, should have scolded him for his brazenness. But she was busy wondering how much anatomy he knew, how much of an education he'd been given on the topic. He'd been baffled enough by the idea of abstaining until marriage, and modesty hardly warranted a thought to him. It probably didn't even register how shocking his actions were. She snatched her hand back, flexing her fingers as if she could shake the sensation of his erection pulsing beneath her touch. But she let it rest against the side of his neck. Her apprehension came from nearly two decades of Viking teachings, not from a lack of desire. He settled again between her thighs, and she twisted her hips into the blaze.

"Fishlegs told me how humans don't mate until their wedding ceremony," Hiccup continued hoarsely. "When we kissed, I- I wanted to mate with you. I want to mate with you right now." His words were paired with the flutter of his fingers beneath her shirt. They danced closer to the edge of her breast bindings, and bitterly cold air swept over the stretch of exposed skin. "I thought you would think I was less... _human... if I tried to touch you like I want to touch you."

Astrid shook her head. The friction of his fingertips as they traced her ribs was like miniature jolts of lightning that made her arch into his touch. "The wedding night thing," she licked her lips and curled her fingers in her hair. "The husband and wife aren't always exactly untouched."

He lowered his face to hers, pushing her braid aside so he could kiss her throat. "Then why did you get so angry when I touched you?" Licking and sucking at the sensitive skin, he skimmed the linen wrapped tightly around her chest.

"Because I am."

She couldn't stop the fragile moan that slipped from her lips when his palm pressed into the curve of her breast. Then he was scratching at the strips of fabric. Tugging at the linen with almost frantic fingers. The sensation was the most extraordinary mingling of pleasure and tickling. "What is this?"

A breathy laugh escaped at his confusion. "Breast bindings. Another human thing you won't understand."

That earned her a frown. "Take them off."

Astrid had to bite back a smile. His expression was absolutely petulant. The idea of his hands touching skin that had never been seen by a man- it was terrifying in a thrilling way- but his unrepentant honesty comforted her. It left an excitement that was almost completely desire.

"No," she refused, pulling his face down to meet hers. He made a sound of frustration into her mouth. "Not yet, at least."

Hiccup gave another little useless tear at the bindings. "When? After our wedding?"

Her nails turned to claws as quickly as her heart tripped, and he yelped. "I'm not having this conversation with you between my legs."

"Then when?"

"Shut up and kiss me before I physically remove you."

****!****

"The chief isn't going to try and sail now, is he?" Astrid's question was pointed at her father, who'd finally gotten to the end of his report of the council meeting. Her fork stood straight in her hand, the prongs stabbed distractedly into a tuber. Though she'd eaten quietly and without interruption while he mentioned the unease brought on by the dragon riders' visit, as soon as he'd mentioned the nest, she'd stiffened. Her teeth came down hard on the side of her tongue, and she swore. Her parents' eyes turned on her.

"The ice hasn't set yet," her father reminded her with a raised brow. "The dragons haven't attacked in weeks, save for the riders. They're due any day. Stoick wants to strike first."

"It's dangerous," she pressed. "It's almost winter. The temperature is dropping every day, and we'd be leaving the island practically defenseless. What if you guys get trapped out there?"

More than that, Astrid was afraid that they might actually find the nest for the first time. Would it be Hiccup's home? The queen's lair? Were the Vikings capable of stumbling upon either, when centuries of

searching had proved the feat impossible? And they were due for a raid- protecting Berk would be three times harder with half of the village gone. Not to mention, it meant Hiccup might be in a race to locate the nest.

"We'll be fine." Her father waved away her concerns without so much as a glance in her direction. His gaze had been refocused on the plate of food in front of him. It was almost half of their usual portions. Astrid had decided not to comment on the bareness of the pantry as her mother cooked, but her stomach noticed, and apparently her father had too.

"It's just too late in the season," she argued, her shoulders falling back against her chair. "Ice aside, the water is freezing. If a Scauldron or some other stray dragon takes down the ship, you'll all die before you reach dry ground. It won't be like last spring."

The head of the Hofferson family clenched his jaw, obviously aggravated by his daughter's insistence. His hand tightened around his fork, and he gave her a leveling look over the table. "We were caught off guard last spring," he growled. "The weather was unfavorable, and half of our rations had been contaminated. We still came back with every man. This search will be the same."

Astrid looked to her mother for support. "And do you think he should go?"

The older woman's scowl was far from encouraging. "I trust Stoick. He's never led us astray before."

She gave an exasperated sigh and glanced back at her plate. "He wants to find that dragon," she muttered, finally picking up her fork and lifting a bite to her mouth. A strange acidity leaked into her tone. "The one who killed his wife."

Her parents went silent, and an uncomfortable tension clouded the room. It was probably a step too far- it likely would have served her better to bite her tongue on those words instead.

"I don't know what's come over yeh lately," her mother accused after a few awkward moments. "You've never had a problem with yer father leaving before. Hel, you've gone with him before. What is it that has yeh so afraid all of a sudden?"

"I'm not afraid!" the girl denied, her hand smacking the table in a show of hardly repressed anger. Not of this at least. There was plenty for her to be afraid of as a dragon-sympathizer living among Vikings, but this wasn't part of it. "I think the chief is using the riders as an excuse to take everyone on a doomed search, when he's really after personal vengeance!"

"Lower your voice!" Her father barked. It took her by surprise, since he wasn't a particularly loud person by nature. She knew she was stepping on toes, especially given her father owed several life debts to the chief of Berk. Still, it had to be said. Stoick was planning to take them to their deaths, without ever knowing that the family he thought was dead still lived.

"I'm sorry," she bit lowly.

"The chief has proved himself willing ta give his life for this village several times over." The glitter of ire in her father's glare was strange to feel on her own face. She wasn't accustomed to displeasing her parents. "If he goes in search for the beast that killed his Valka, so be it. I'll sail with him."

Astrid opened her mouth to argue further, but she was cut off by a knock at the front door.

The family went still, the boom of her father's voice still hanging in the air. There was a moment of unsure hesitation, and then Astrid's mother glanced at her and jerked her chin towards the front door. The blonde set down her fork, pushing her plate away, and stood. No matter who the late night visitor turned out to be, she'd lost her appetite.

A nervousness settled in her gut. She wondered if their conversation had been overheard. Setting her features in a neutral expression, Astrid went to the door and cracked it open.

"Evenin', Astrid." Spitelout Jorgenson gave her an easy smile and a nod of greeting. "Yer family take dinner at home tonight?"

She eased the door open further, her unease growing at the sight of her future father-in-law at their threshold. "Yes," she answered, forcing her lips to curl upwards. "If you're looking for Snotlout, I think he's with the twins."

"Aye. I just spoke with him, actually." There was a friendly gleam to his eyes, one that shouldn't have made her skin crawl but did. The widower was a handsome man for his age, and he and his son favored one another. Snotlout had never made her feel uncomfortable, like she was being sized up or evaluated, but his father did. She tried to convince herself that the fear stemmed from her respect for the Viking warrior. "I was looking ta speak ta yer parents."

Astrid searched her tongue for a polite answer, but she could only nod and step aside.

His boots thudded against the floorboards as he entered. His height wasn't impressive, but the way he held himself gave the impression that he filled the room.

"Spitelout!" Her father's expression lifted when the other Viking entered, as if he hadn't just been engaged in a heated argument. He stood and clasped his old friend's arm with a confused smile. "What brings yeh here?"

The man gave her mother a quick nod, and then his gaze cut to Astrid. "What with the council meeting and all, we've been doing some thinking." His eyes went back to her father. "Spare a second ta talk?"

Her mother's voice broke her stare and made her look away. "Astrid," she began, but the girl interrupted her.

"Go to my room," she finished flatly, glancing at the two men with undisguised suspicion. A quiet panic was beginning to swell in her throat, though she couldn't quite name it yet. With a frosty goodbye, she turned her back on them and started for the stairs. There was no

use in trying to be included in the conversation, but that wouldn't stop her from listening in. The blonde trudged up the steps, and then opened and closed her bedroom door. Then she silently lowered herself to the top step, where she'd be hidden by shadows, and brought her knees to her chest.

Spitelout didn't dance around the reason for his visit. They briefly discussed the news announced at the council meeting, both men commenting on the danger of the mission. For a moment, Astrid thought that perhaps someone else saw reason and was trying to gain support before confronting Stoick. That hope was dashed, however, as soon as her fiance's name was spoken.

"Snotlout's convinced that this winter will be rough," the young man's father began. "Between the scarcity of food, the search, the devil riders' sudden appearance... He's concerned for your daughter."

She clutched at her hammering heart, biting her lip to keep a heavy exhale from giving her away. Her other hand gripped the stair beneath her with a white-knuckled grip. Her parents' voices went in and out as they spoke, her mother's soft alto and her father's calm baritone. Spitelout's tenor rose above it all, explaining his son's affection for Astrid, the very real odds of him or her father dying at sea. She trembled, though she wasn't sure if it was with despair or rage, as the pieces of dialogue slowly came to point to one conclusion.

"My boy suggested- and I agreed- that it'd be better for the two to spend some time together before he leaves with the rest of the search party. In the event that any tragedy should occur while we're gone, Astrid will be taken care of. And who knows? Maybe there'll be an heir to take Snot's place."

Bile rose in the back of her throat. An heir. He wasn't talking about Hiccup.

Her mind flashed back to that afternoon, to the warmth of the wild boy's hands on her bare skin and his hot arousal pressed against her. When she tried to picture Snotlout in his place, her stomach twisted. Her muscles tensed. Her knees pressed tightly together, and Astrid looked to the dark ceiling to try and control her harsh breaths.

"He's mad for her," Spitelout chuckled. "And from what he tells me, she feels the same."

Blinding fury almost sent Astrid to her feet, but she dug her nails into the step and grit her teeth in silence. That damned kiss...

"So, you want to move the wedding up," her mother summarized, and her words echoed clearly through the hall and up the stairs.

Spitelout's reply was like the snap of a bow's string as it sent the first funeral arrow flying. The flaming tip landed hard in the center of her chest and pierced her heart clean through. "I want to move the wedding up."

****Chapter Sixteen.****

There was a trembling in Astrid's knees that never bothered her when she fought in battle. There was a surreal aspect to the shade of the shadows, the hollow thuds of her boots on the stairs. Her nails dug into her palms as she kept her hands clenched in fists, but she didn't even feel the sting.

They were talking dates. Could her mother finish her preparations by next Friday? No. What about Stoick- could Spitelout and her father talk him into delaying the trip another few weeks? For their wedding, probably. Though it'd make the journey even more treacherous. Could a hunt be arranged in time? Possibly.

Her mother was the only one to notice Astrid standing at the bottom of the stairs. The two Viking men had their backs to her, unaware of the icy glare she gave them. At first, her mother's brows shot up, but then settled back into place. She must have known her daughter would resist. Features hardening, she scowled and gave Astrid a silent, barely noticeable head shake. A warning.

She'd never been good at listening to those.

"This is why Berk is dying," she said quietly, her voice low and deadly. The two men straightened at the sound of her voice, twisting to see the blonde girl trembling with fury. Surprise registered in their features, and her father stared at her with something like thunder. "Because everyone's still stuck in the old ways. Hunting down the dragons' nest because that's what we've always done. Marrying off daughters without consulting them because that's how things have always been."

"Astrid," her mother bit out. She stood and matched her daughter's cold glower. "You will apologize and go upstairs. Now."

"I won't," she snapped. "I'm not livestock to be sold off! I get a say!" Her gaze shot back to the men, and she made a sharp gesture towards the door. "Things are changing out there. Even more than you realize. But instead of letting people think for themselves, you'd rather roll over and die."

"I'm sorry Spitelout," her father growled. Behind his thick beard, he held a clenched jaw, but he didn't take his eyes off of her. "She's gotten it into her head that this search is going to end in disaster. She's been in a fit since I gave them the news."

"A woman's worry," the Viking replied casually, though his expression seemed just as dark. He pushed away from the table and stood, straightening his belt. "Not a man alive who doesn't know that. Snot advised me to expect as much from her."

With a half-stifled snarl, she lifted her chin. "Maybe he should have advised you not to try and use the same bolt of fabric for my wedding dress and my widow's garb."

"Astrid!"

"It's fine," Spitelout said with a hand held up to stop her mother's exclamation. His gaze turned to her father. "I'll let you and yer

wife work this out as a family. Yeh can let me know when yer ready ta talk ta Stoick."

Her father gave her another scalding glance before turning to his old friend. "Aye. We'll go tomorrow to finalize the date with him." He extended his hand, and the men clasped arms with tense nods.

"I'll tell Snot yeh said hello," Spitelout tossed over his shoulder at Astrid as he moved to the front door. She bristled, knowing that the comment was meant to dig. For the second time that evening, she found her skin crawling.

"I'll tell him myself soon enough," she hissed. She fully intended on searching out her _fiance_ and letting her fists communicate her fury. Just the thought of his smug face as he plotted with his father made her roil with rage.

Spitelout only gave a half wave over his shoulder before pulling open the Hoffersons' door and slipping out. It closed behind him quietly, the only calm in the dangerous, crackling atmosphere.

Astrid found herself baring her teeth after him, and she took a step forward to do something- what, she wasn't sure. But before she could analyze the urge, her mother's grip locked on her upper arm and jerked her around. The flat of her hand came down hard on Astrid's cheek, and the light _crack_ made the girl's braid jump over her shoulder.

The slap stole the breath from her lungs in a sensation more surprising than the pain. Her skin burned from the impact, and after searching the inside of her cheek with her tongue, she exhaled sharply and looked up. Her left eye watered, but it was nothing compared to the tears glittering in her mother's gaze.

"Are yeh pleased with yerself?" she whispered harshly. Releasing Astrid with little less than a shove, she gestured towards the front door. "Do yeh nae understand the _extent_ of yer ungratefulness?"

She resisted the urge to rub at the soreness blooming in her arm or bring her fingertips to her stinging face. Showing weakness now would be the last thing she did. "All I understand is that no matter what I say, you will _never_ _listen_ to me."

Her ire still blazed hot and painful in her chest. After all the begging she'd done, the countless arguments and endless pleading to be released from her engagement- Snotlout snapped his fingers, and they stuck a bit in her mouth. The betrayal was more acute than anything, a reminder of how easily traded off she was.

"We don't have the _luxury_," her mother spat. "If it weren't for the Jorgensons, there wouldn't be food for yeh ta _eat_." She paused for a moment, watching as her words hit Astrid like a second blow, and then said, "Do yeh understand now?"

The girl shook her head in disbelief. She looked to her father so that he could assuage her fears, correct her mother, but neither happened. His frown was as deep and stony.

The Jorgensons had money. They had resources that families like the

Hoffersons didn't have. Larger herds, more land, better status. It wasn't just Snotlout's claim to the throne that set Astrid in his path, or Spitelout's friendship with her father. But even though she'd known that all her life, she'd never considered her parents _in need_, so it'd never occurred to her that the Jorgensons' finances might be putting food on her table. The realization made her nauseous.

"Since when?" she breathed, looking between them. "How long?"

"Since the handsal," her mother answered. The tightness was still in her voice, her expression still a mask of righteous anger.

Astrid knotted her fingers into her bangs. She dropped her gaze and tried to steady the trembling that her adrenaline rush had left in its wake. For some reason, she hadn't felt the noose of her engagement around her neck lately. Like she'd almost been able to say she wouldn't go through with it. But this changed everything. The noose tightened painfully. She could almost feel the scratchy rope digging into her skin.

"I- I have to go," she murmured, dropping her hand and taking a step away. The urge to run was quickly mounting, and her lungs burned for cold air. "I can't-"

"Until yeh apologize ta Spitelout, yeh won't be doing anything," her father interrupted. His face was still closed off and dark. "Go upstairs, Astrid. You've dishonored me more than my brother ever could." His gaze cut away, as if he couldn't even bear to look at her.

She felt a heavy weight settle on her chest. Between her ribs, a sharp knife twisted, and she could only draw her lower lip between her teeth and nod. Her mother's eyes followed her across the room, and she stole a final glance at the dinner table. The empty plates still sat in their places.

They were quiet as she climbed the stairs. This time, Astrid didn't stay at the last step to eavesdrop. She shut her bedroom door firmly behind her and crawled onto her bed, afraid of what she might overhear. Thoughts flew in wild, chaotic patterns in her head, and she leaned back against the wall with her knees drawn to her chest. Shame and indignation and despair crushed against her, meshing and molding into something bleak and hopeless.

She watched the window for what felt like hours. Though she didn't move, the shadows of her room did, tilting and stretching as the moon rose higher. At one point she went to lay her forehead on her knees and realized that her cheeks were wet. When she scrubbed the dampness away, the place where her mother had slapped her felt raw.

Astrid didn't recall falling asleep, but when the creak of her window broke the night's silence, she was curled up on her side and bleary eyed. She blinked into the dark. Hiccup's shape looked even more dragon-like silhouetted in black, but for some reason, the strangeness of it didn't frighten her as it should. The thought struck her that she should greet him, but she couldn't unglue her jaw. Her arms were locked around her knees and her body felt stiff.

He knelt by the pile of furs he'd taken to sleeping on, shrugging off his cloak and pulling back his mask. She observed him reaching for the pallet, then going still. His pale face was easier to see in the moonlight, and it tilted towards her. Their eyes met. Hiccup's head cocked sharply to the right. Slowly, he rose from his knees and reached a hand over the edge of her bed.

His fingertips brushed across her cheek. Almost in shock, he drew his arm back, and surprise twisted his features.

She let her eyes close. It was too much to explain, too heavy to lift. All her energy was spent, and satisfying his questions required more strength than she possessed at that moment.

Hiccup seemed to understand. Without a word, he lifted onto the bed. Half-frozen fingers worked at her wrists, unclasping her tight hold. He gently pulled her up into a sitting position that felt taxing, and then his hands moved to her shoulder pads. They were slipped off, and then he tugged her shirt upwards. She weakly lifted her arms, allowing him to ease the garment over her head. Then he pulled her onto his lap so he could reach the laces of her skirt.

It should have felt strange to be undressed by him. She should have flinched away from his cold hands and snarled at his audacity, but the instances where his skin accidentally bumped against hers were like pinches trying to rouse her from a bad dream. He dropped her boots and her clothes off of the foot of her bed and then found her nightgown hanging over the back of her desk chair. With equal tenderness, he helped her into the thin fabric and then pushed back the bed furs. After tucking her legs beneath the warmth, he settled behind her and pressed her to his chest.

Her sigh shook, and she mustered the will to guide his hand to her mouth. She kissed his palm in thanks and laced his fingers with hers.

"No prolonged hand touching," he murmured, his words muffled where his lips buried in her hair.

It was supposed to be teasing, she knew. A funny nod to their conversation of mate things. But in the aftermath of her parents' discussion, all she could think was that her hands didn't belong to her. Her hands had been bought with Jorgenson money. The waist that his arm curled around, that didn't belong to her either. She was no longer a person, but a series of merchant's wares that had been purchased in a slow transaction of constantly accumulating debt.

None of her body belonged to herself. It wasn't hers to give to Hiccup. But she held his hand tighter anyways in possessive selfishness.

Astrid let herself fall asleep to the repetitive press of his chest expanding with every breath. In her dreams, it became the soft caress of a breeze at her back, edging her onward. It had been a while since she'd dreamed about running, but she fell into it with quick familiarity. Her arms moved fluidly at her sides. Her legs worked beneath her with easy strength. Her feet were bare and hardly ghosting over damp green grass. When she lengthened her stride, a gust of wind picked her up, and for a moment she was running on a

swirling current of air.

She'd had dreams of running her whole life. Unconscious fantasies of racing her surroundings and being held just at the threshold of gravity. Just a breath, a step, a heartbeat away from the earth falling away beneath her. But she never won that race. Not until now.

She stirred quietly in the dark hours before dawn, waking in a slow way that left her confused as to whether the noise at her ear was the wind blowing or someone's breath. Calloused fingertips rasped across the curve of her neck. What had been warm rays of sunshine bearing down on her back became the flat wall of Hiccup's chest. She shifted in his arms and breathed a short hiss. Through the layers of their clothing, she could feel the hard pressure of his arousal.

His mouth took the place of his fingers, dabbing light kisses behind her earlobe. Sighing, Astrid tilted her hips in search of a more pleasurable angle. He obliged. As he nuzzled the back of her neck, Hiccup eased back just a fraction before grinding back against her rear. Just shy of the place that alerted her of an urgent need.

Her hand found his forearm, barred against her chest to hold her tight. Wrapping her fingers around his wrist, she arched against him and pressed back to encourage a slow, languorous rhythm. He exhaled harshly but didn't speak. Instead, he met her with a hint more force, and she found herself nudging his thigh between hers to guide his strokes where she wanted him.

The night before, she'd felt like stolen goods. As Hiccup's hand fumbled for the hem of her nightgown, though, she felt like the Nightmare pacing in its cage. He lifted it enough to slip beneath, his palm smoothing over the plane of her stomach and nails scratching into her skin. Then he reached higher, groping at her breasts beneath the ridges of her bindings. Her fingers were on the way to guide his to the knot of her wraps when his open mouthed kiss against her pulse point made her shiver and moan.

She could tell by the answering throb at his groin that he enjoyed the sound. His tongue laved against the spot again to twist another choked noise from between her lips.

Trying to regain her focus, she found the shape of his hand beneath the fabric of her bodice and slid it to the lower edge of her ribs, where the flat knot of her bindings was tucked. After a moment of blind searching, he found it and unfolded the linen with unexpected expertise. The strips came loose around her chest. He wasted no time in delving beneath them.

His hand was clumsy as he explored, first scraping rough fingertips across the indentations left in her skin, then testing the softness of her breasts with curiosity. When his thumbnail scratched across her nipple in accident, she jolted hard against him. Her sex twinged with a slick and painful desire. Hiccup made a noise that she couldn't be sure was completely fascination and returned to the sensitive peak. She trembled and writhed against him as he brushed, pinched, pulled, and twisted, learning what made her gasp, what made her arch. What made her fingers turn to claws and what set her hips digging pleadingly into his.

Astrid wasn't sure what made her do it. But she tugged at his arm and guided him lower. She smoothed his hand between her thighs, sinking her teeth into her lower lip to bite back her whimper of pleasure.

This time he hesitated, pausing before brushing his knuckles down her center. His touch was light as he traced her shape. Behind her, she could feel his head tilting when his fingertips found the damp evidence of her desire. His curiosity was a palpable thing, and before she could decide whether or not she wanted him to, he was slipping beneath the barrier of her underwear. Her breath hitched, her heart hammering. He slowly found the source of her slick arousal, and her hips surged of their own accord.

Then the searching touch disappeared. He drew away, making Astrid wonder if she was relieved or distraught. She shifted just slightly to see Hiccup bringing his hand to the dim light. Embarrassment speared her through when she realized he was inspecting the wet sheen left on his fingers.

"Stop," she whispered, lightly smacking his hand away from his face. If it weren't for the dark, he'd see the bright flush of her cheeks and the mortification in her expression.

"What is it?" he answered in a tone just as quiet. Dodging her attempts to stop him, he brought his fingers close and inhaled her scent. Then his tongue darted out to taste her.

She groaned and tried to untangle herself from him, but his arm barred her exit. "It's for sex," she told him grudgingly. Her explanation tried to choke her on its way out. "It helps you... enter me." By you of course she meant men, and by me she meant women. But she had a feeling trying to explain her slip would only start a discussion she didn't have the mental capacity to finish.

Hiccup made a thoughtful noise and moved to delve between her thighs again, but she twisted her hips away and pressed her knees shut. "Will entering you be difficult?"

Astrid squirmed, uncomfortable. "For you, probably not," she muttered. "For me, though..."

"I don't get it." He allowed his arm to rest around her waist again, seeming to understand that his opportunity for exploration had ended. That, at least, was a relief. And a disappointment.

Her mouth pulled into a frown as she settled back against him. He would be leaving soon, and for some reason she felt like she had to make the most of their precious time in the dark. "Well. I am a virgin, Hiccup."

"What's that?"

"It's not something you write on your big fancy stick," she growled. "It's a fancy word for untouched. I haven't had a man inside me."

He nuzzled at her shoulder. "And that makes it difficult for you to—"

"It's supposed to hurt," she interrupted. She had to resist the urge to bury her face in the pillow and hide from his humiliating questions.

He stopped nuzzling. A moment of silence stretched between them as he thought on his new discovery. "Is that normal?"

Astrid shrugged. "It's what I've always been told. Ruff knows more than I do."

He paused, and then said, "You should ask her how to make it more painless. I don't want to hurt you."

With a soft snort, she rolled her eyes. "Yeah, sure, I'll get right on that."

He didn't ask anymore questions after that. Whether or not he picked up on her sarcasm, he seemed to grow pensive. They laid in silence while her embarrassment faded and he fit together the pieces of human mating. Eventually the warmth of sleep caught her again, and she dozed off in his arms. She thought she woke to a kiss on her temple, but when she opened her eyes, he was already gone.

A good night's sleep put some things into perspective for Astrid. She left that morning with a sense of purpose, a drive. She hadn't stopped at her parents' insistence when they'd called her name at the front door. She spun her axe easily in her hand and kept her chin level as she made her way through the village. The vapors of her exhale plumed from her nostrils like the hissing of a dragon's smoke.

She found the twins and her fiance repairing old Girtha Gilstrap's goat pen. The blonde siblings saw her first, giving her far off waves and cheery morning greetings. Snotlout's head snapped up at the sound of her name, and he turned to look at her. His expression was incredibly pleased, his smile crooked in a way that reminded her of Hiccup. Dropping his hammer, he stood from his kneeling position and went to meet her.

"Babe! I've been waiting for you all day. Did my dad-"

The flat of her axe slammed across his face with a sick _thwack. _Snotlout was sent to his knees, his helmet knocked to the grass, and the twins made matching sounds of shock.

"Astrid! _Dude_!"

"Snot, what did you _do_?"

She saw his mouth opening to make some exclamation, but she threw her axe into the post he'd been working at and slammed her knee into the other side of his head. Once he was down, she dropped down and knelt over his chest. His cheekbone and left eye were already swelling from her weapon's blow, and he hissed in pain. Flipping her braid over her shoulder, she grabbed his tunic by the collar and pulled him upwards.

"I don't know _what_ possessed you to do this," she snarled. "But I hope you don't think this changes _anything._"

"What?" he groaned, squinting up at her. When he spoke, she could see the bright red of fresh blood staining his tongue and teeth.

"Our fathers can set the wedding for tomorrow," Astrid continued. "You can put me in whatever hideous dress you want and get drunk off your ass for our wedding night. But I swear to Frigga, I will never be the sweet and loving wife you want. I will spend my whole life making you regret the day you bought me. I'll never love you, I'll never let you touch me, and I sure as Hel won't be giving you any children."

Her fury was hot and dry. She released him, letting his head drop back against the dirt.

"I don't-" Snotlout shifted his jaw and cringed before trying again. "I don't get it. You- you wanted to be with me. He told me. You were just afraid of losing me. Weren't you?"

Astrid glared, her upper lip curling back in livid confusion. "Are you delusional? I never wanted to be with you."

He went still, and there was suddenly a pain in his unswollen blue eye that she suspected had nothing to do with her blows. His brows furrowed, making his breath hitch on a wince. "But he said... he said you were just trying to push me away."

Her gaze narrowed. She glanced up at the twins, who watched with wide eyes, but they only shrugged and gave her baffled expressions. When she glanced back down, there was a vulnerability that was too weird to see in the face of Snotlout Jorgenson.

"Who?" she asked, easing her knee off of his chest. "Who told you that stuff?"

The Viking shook his head and looked away, not meeting her gaze. Her brain shuffled through the list of culprits, wondering who would lie about something so personal? Who had anything to gain from convincing Snot she was in love with him? Was it his slimy father? Her own? Or- she swallowed hard at the idea- had the chief found her behavior suspicious and tried to interfere with her engagement?

She thought she was going to have to pry the answer from him, but then he lifted his fist to wipe a smear of blood from his lips. Snotlout quoted, "'All her hostility is a defense mechanism. I know for a fact she loves you.' That's what he told me. Fishlegs."

17. Chapter 17

I have awesome new fan art for you guys! Tumblr user fuckyeahthehawkseye (also known as Clary Chase here on ff) made an incredible edit for Wild Hearts that I could hardly wait to share with you. Check out their account and shower them with praise!

Chapter Seventeen.

"Why did you do it?"

The blacksmith's apprentice jumped at the sound of her cool voice in

the forge's doorway, the sword in his hands clattering to the floor as he whirled around. "Ast-Astrid," he stammered, his gaze taking in her tense posture, her lethal glower. "What are you doing here?"

Astrid's eyes swept through the forge in a quick inspection, pleased to find him alone. The whir of the whetstone slowly groaned into silence as it stilled.

>She smoothed the misty rain off of her braid with a steady hand and then flicked the water to the side. Her fingers flexed, and she halved the distance between them. "Snotlout told me everything, Fishlegs." A sick sense of satisfaction caught her as he paled at her words. "He told me how you went to him first. How you brought up our engagement. How you convinced him I was lying about my feelings for him."

She sneered, taking a step forward with each accusation. Fishlegs stumbled backwards and nearly sliced the back of his ankles on the weapon he'd fumbled.

"I'll explain everything," he swore, holding out a hand as if to keep her back. "I didn't think-"

"I'd find out?" she finished for him. Her hands clenched into fists. For his safety, the twins had confiscated her axe. "You made him think I was some self-sacrificial damsel, just keeping him at a distance because I was afraid of losing him. You encouraged him to move up the wedding and trap us both in a miserable marriage. _Why_, Fishlegs?"

The Viking nudged the sword away from his feet and glanced nervously between it and her, like she might try to reach for the blade. "I... I thought it'd be for the best."

"For the best?" She gave a harsh and humorless laugh. "How could that possibly be the best for anyone? It was _cruel._"

His surprise seemed to be wearing off. Fishlegs straightened and held out his hands in an attempt to calm her. "I know you might not think so now, but-"

"Who are you to interfere in our business anyway?" She battered through his reasoning tone with a hiss, narrowing her glare at him. "You had no right to get involved in our lives!"

He let his eyes fall shut. "I'm sorry, I didn't want-"

She didn't let him finish. "It's _my_ engagement, it's _my_ wedding, and it's _my_ life! You were the one person I never thought-"

"Astrid, I saw you with him!" The sound of his raised voice cut through her ranting, freezing her censure in her throat. His expression twisted with reproach, and she found herself falling silent.

She took a moment to catch her breath, feeling her heart thudding against her chest. "Snotlout?" she whispered, the wind stolen from her sails. "If it's about that kiss, that was nothing. I just..." Shaking her head, she wished she hadn't noticed his brows shooting up

at the word kiss. "...had to see something."

"Not Snot," Fishlegs told her lowly. His gaze was accusing. Her stomach plummeted. "You know I'm not talking about Snot. You know who I'm talking about."

Hiccup. He saw her with Hiccup.

"What do you think you saw?" Even she could hear how guilty her quiet retort sounded. But she lifted her chin and stared him down anyways.

The quirk of his mouth told her how reluctant he was to say any more. "It's getting cold. We had some spare furs, so I..." As he trailed off, his gaze skipped to the side. "You were there. I saw you two. Together. I know things have changed between you."

Astrid took a breath to respond, but the door to the forge creaked open behind her. The two looked to the entrance to see Gobber limping in. His shoulders were damp from the rain, little drops clinging to the sides of his mustache. In his arms, he carried the linen cloths he used to wrap deliveries.

"Am I interruptin' something?" he said by way of greeting. His eyes moved between the two of them, testing the tension, and the way his gaze landed on her, she knew he'd likely heard the last bit off their conversation. Heat rose to her cheeks, and she quickly replayed their words in her head to see if any of them could reveal anything about Hiccup.

"Yes," she answered tersely. If Gobber had seen Snotlout's face, then he already knew she was on a rampage, so there was no reason to lie about it.

"Eh, don't care." He waved his prosthetic hand toward the door and dumped the cloths on his work table. "Take it outside, I got work to do. And pick up tha' sword, Legs, for the love of Freya!" With a grumble about good-fer-nothin' teenagers, he went to the anvil and began inspecting the project he'd left there.

Fishlegs looked at Astrid. She scowled and nodded, tilting her head toward the door in a wordless command. Since they'd been so scattered lately, she'd forgotten that she was the unofficial leader of their little group. It was something she suddenly didn't want to be reminded of. She'd dragged Fishlegs into her treason, and now the twins too. She'd nearly broken Snot's jaw. Her actions were causing ripples. She didn't want anyone looking to her for leadership.

Legs retrieved the sword from the floor and hung it on the wall before turning to exit. Astrid was moving to follow him outside when Gobber cleared his throat behind her. She paused and glanced back at him.

"I hope yeh know what yer doing," he warned her. His stern tone felt like a heavy hand clamping down on the back of her neck. "Yer starting ta raise some brows."

She met his solemn gaze with one of her own. A snide remark settled on her tongue, tasting like bitterness and the hundreds of meals she'd eaten from Spitelout's hand. But just as her lips parted to

she speak, she swallowed it, clenching her jaw instead. With a short nod, she indicated her acknowledgment and shifted her weight on her heel. He was still watching when she shut the forge door behind her.

Fishlegs straightened when she appeared, stepping close and lowering his voice. "I know you're mad at me, Astrid. But you have to think about this logically."

The roof of the forge just barely concealed them from the rain, but she could still feel it spitting at her side. She searched their surroundings for anyone who might pass by before answering. "I have done nothing but think about everything ever since he showed up." Her whisper was laced with agitation. "Do you not trust him anymore? Do you not trust me?"

"I do," he insisted. "But what's going to happen after the village finds out about Hiccup?"

"They'll be grateful, because he's going to save everyone." It was an exaggeration, of course, if not a half-truth. But that was the point of all their secrecy- the chance to foster a peace on the island that was never possible before. Astrid had to believe that in the long run, the people would be thankful.

"Maybe," Fishlegs nodded. "Let's say they do. Best case scenario, Hiccup finds this queen, takes out the nest, and he becomes Berk's hero- are you going to stay by him or will you honor your contract?"

She folded her arms over her chest, caught between self-consciousness and contempt. "You know I don't want to marry Snotlout."

Her heart gave a sore little squeeze. Did he even know the half of how trapped she was? How the decision was hardly hers to make?

"Say you don't," he continued. "Say they don't find out about what you've already done, but you let him announce his intentions for you. How do you think that's going to affect your parents? What about Snotlout?"

As she listened to him repeat questions she'd already asked herself, her nails dug into her upper arms. "It's my life, Fishlegs. I should get to choose what makes me happy."

"Think about it, Astrid!" His voice rose a little in volume, and she gave him a sharp look until he brought it down. "Use your brain. Do you really think Spitelout will let that kind of humiliation go so easily? He will do everything in his power to discredit Hiccup, and even more than that to get back at you. He'll paint Hiccup as a threat and you as a traitor."

"Hiccup will be alright," she assured him with a steely confidence. She didn't try to make any promises about her own safety. Glancing at the door to the forge with suspicion, she dropped her tone to barely audible. "I know who his father is. If we pull everything off, he'll be fine."

Fishlegs drew in a quick gasp, his blond brows climbing his forehead. "His dad's alive?"

She gave him a short nod. "His dad's the chief."

The young Viking's hand flew to his mouth, and his eyes widened. The shock of her discovery made him take a half step back. "Stoick the Vast is Hiccup's dad?"

Still feeling like his words were too loud, even though he barely whispered, she nodded again. "That's why he'll be safe. As long as nothing goes wrong, Hiccup should have his birthright to fall back on."

Fishlegs' gaze darted around, restless as he processed the new information. He seemed to give it a moment of intense thought, and then he inhaled sharply with new realization. "Astrid, Snotlout's the heir to the throne of Berk. If Hiccup shows up to claim it after twenty years, and you with it-" He shook his head and swallowed hard. "Taking you away from him is one thing. Taking the chiefdom?"

She stiffened. "They won't let it happen."

The sudden truth stuck like a pitchfork between them. For a moment, the hissing of the misty rain and the clanging of Gobber working at the anvil replaced their conversation. Dread clenched her windpipe, cold and tight. Snotlout might bear the humiliation of losing her to Hiccup, if it came to it. But if the rightful heir tried to claim the chiefdom, the Jorgensons would put up a fight. Questions about his legitimacy would be raised, accusations about his motives would be made.

"Snot's an okay guy," Fishlegs whispered. "His father isn't." Lowering his head to meet her gaze, he put his hands on her shoulders. "He'll do anything to get his son on the throne. He will tear Hiccup apart, and when he's done all the damage he can do there, he'll come after you." Astrid stared at him wordlessly. >"He's going to drag you through the mud. You and your parents and the entire Hofferson clan- he'll take whatever this thing is you have with Hiccup and twist it."<p>

She resisted the urge to dig her palm into the ache in her chest. The entire time, she'd thought of nothing but her parents reaction to Hiccup's reveal, of Stoick's reaction. She hadn't even considered how the rest of the village would take the news of their budding relationship, because it was something she was trying to keep herself, secret and safe.

Fishlegs elaborated. "He won't see it like you will. They'll call you a treasonous harlot, a status chaser, and more. You'll be lucky if Stoick spares all this deceiving and sneaking around you've been doing. But he won't be able to save you if they try to have you banished or worse for breaking your contract."

She jerked away from his outstretched arms. "Worse? You don't think they'd-"

"Try to have you executed?" His expression is bleak. "I do. And if they can't get their way under the laws, I wouldn't be surprised if you and Hiccup both have something worse to be afraid of."

Turning abruptly, Astrid faced away from him and stared out at the

rest of the village. A quiet fear took root in her belly, twisting and slithering with sudden distrust. The village she'd grown up in and protected her whole life- would it really turn on her because of what she was doing with Hiccup? She'd expected it, to be painted as a dragon sympathizer, but to be put to the death for breaking off her engagement? Could they really save the island just for everything to come to that?

"It's just not safe," he pressed. "For either of you."

She pushed back her bangs and rested her hand on her forehead. "I don't know how to stop it," she whispered. "I'm already- He doesn't understand stuff like contracts and obligations. He doesn't even know about Stoick yet."

Fishlegs was quiet for a moment, letting her try and sort her thoughts out. Then he said quietly, "And Astrid... I don't want to have to say it, but it's probably best you keep away from him anyways."

She turned back to look at him. There was a faint tint to his cheeks. "Why?"

Wringing his hands, he glanced out at the rain. "I just- You're the first human besides his mother he's ever interacted with. His attachment... I just don't think it's a good idea."

Furrowing her brow, she let her hand fall from her hair. "I don't get it. Why not?"

He let his fingers curl tightly into his palms. "He's never known another woman. I think you should seriously consider the fact that his... desire might not be specific to you. You might just be..." He cringed away from the last word. "Convenient."

Astrid felt less of a sting from her mother's slap. The breath rushed from her lungs in one tight exhale.

The shock in her face must have been clearer than she meant to reveal. Fishlegs immediately began to ramble. "I'm not saying it is, okay? I'm just saying that statistically speaking, he hasn't met enough women to know that he really prefers you over someone else. You happened to be the one to stumble across him, so naturally he's going to develop an attachment for you, and that's totally okay, but I think you should be careful in reciprocating those feelings. At least until he's had the chance to interact with other humans and develop a better sense of the spectrum of human emotions. And it might be for the best that you take a break. Maybe he's not really what you want either, just not Snotlout. You're both kind of isolated from everybody right now, and so that automatically-"

"What?"

Coming to a halt, he blinked. His hands froze in the air, halfway through some vague gesture. "What?"

She shook her head in disbelief, her lips trying at thoughts she couldn't force into phrases. "That's why you told him," she laughed mirthlessly. Instead of anger, she only felt hurt to realize how deep

his betrayal ran. "You think Hiccup wants to fuck me because I'm the first girl to come along. And you think I want to fuck him as an act of rebellion."

He winced at her harsh words. "Not like that, exactly."

"You wanted Snotlout to move the wedding up so I wouldn't fool around with Hiccup." It was the point of their entire discussion. "You think we're risking our lives for- for infatuation."

Instead of going on the defensive, Fishlegs frowned. He dropped his hands at his sides and gave his head a shake. "Isn't that what it is? Just... infatuation?"

Astrid drew back. The rain was clattering more heavily now, and she could feel it soaking into the sleeve of her shirt. It made goosebumps chill up her arms and down her spine. But it didn't account for the ice freezing in her veins. And because she didn't know the answer to his question, she slid her gaze past his face, turned away, and stalked out into the rain.

!

From the light of the candle in the middle of her floor, the shadows that their hands cast on the wall looked stretched and enormous. His fingers had warmed since she opened the window for him and he came in from the icy rain. They laced and brushed against hers, tracing the lines and scars in her skin just as she examined his. Just like the very first time they'd met and he'd held out his hand for her to touch- now they were palm to palm and quietly appreciating the sweet sparks of contact where they met. Touches softer than butterfly wings were traded between them, warming what the weather tried to chill.

"There's something going on," he whispered, not looking up from their hands. "Something you're not telling me."

She barely flicked her eyes up at him, only examining his shadow-painted features for a second. They both sat cross-legged on the floor facing each other, her in her nightgown and him in just his pants and dry bed furs. His hair had been dripping when he crawled inside, but it was slowly drying. She hadn't seen him since that morning. A part of her didn't want to.

"It's nothing you have to worry about," she murmured, writing her name in his hand with her thumb. "Stupid Viking stuff."

"You said I'm a Viking," he reminded her. "If I'm not a dragon and I'm not a Viking, what am I?"

She brought her eyes back up to his face, this time holding them there until he met her gaze. "You are a Viking," she insisted. "You're just a little behind on the customs."

Hiccup snorted, but didn't argue. He fluttered his fingertips at the base of her wrists and danced them up to the tip of her middle finger. After another few moments of quiet, he spoke again. "What happened last night to make you cry?"

"Stupid Vikings stuff," she repeated. She knew it wouldn't satisfy

his relentless curiosity so she sighed deeply and shrugged one shoulder. "I fought with my parents. I spoke out of turn and disobeyed them."

"What did you fight about?"

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Snotlout."

"Oh." He curled his fingers around hers and brought her hands to his face. Nuzzling them like Toothless often did while she petted him, he made a faint purring sound. "Your skin is soft."

Astrid gave him a helpless little smile. It was weak, the first one she'd cracked since waking up in his arms that morning. "Your cheeks are rough," she told him in kind. "You should shave."

His answering expression could make one think she'd suggested he lick Gobber's mace hand. "It's annoying," he protested. "I end up losing more blood than I do hair."

The mental image was faintly amusing. "Hairiness. One more thing I guess we can chalk up to your dad."

Hiccup paused to look at her. "He's got a lot of hair?"

What a weird conversation to be having about her chief. "Yeah," she nodded. This was easier to discuss than her own discomforts. "You kind of look like him. Though you won't think so when you meet him."

His mouth pressed into a firm line. She thought he was about to end the conversation again, but then he slowly began rubbing his scratchy jaw into her palm again. "Tell me something about him. A story, if you have any."

Pleased he was showing this small amount of progress, she hummed in thought and sifted through her memories of Stoick the Vast. "I've known him my whole life. I used to think we were cut from the same cloth." After a moment of brainstorming, she decided on an instance she could tell him about. She dropped her hands and shifted around the candle so that she could lean into him. He pulled back the furs he wore around his shoulder and let her fold into his side. His skin burned hot through the thin fabric of her nightgown.

"Okay," she began, resting her head on his shoulder. "When I was little, my uncle was my biggest hero. He was strong and brave and basically my favorite person in the world." It had been a while since anybody in her family had spoken about Fearless Finn Hofferson, and it was weird to talk about him the way she'd seen him as a child. The pride of her clan, instead of the shame. "Anyways, he was famous for being fearless, for never flinching in the face of danger. He stared down dragons the size of houses and would stick his head in a Gronkle's mouth for fun. I grew up wanting to be just like him."

Hiccup went a little still. "This story is about my dad, right? He's not your uncle, is he?"

Astrid rolled her eyes and gave him a light punch on the knee. "Shut up and let me tell the story."

"Just making sure."

Huffing and shaking her head, she pressed a quick kiss to his collarbone before continuing. "So one day we were attacked by this thing called the Flightmare. I was with him at the time, and I thought for sure he was going to be the first one to kill it and bring its head back to the village." After realizing he'd tensed again, she said, "Sorry. We didn't know better."

"Go on," he muttered.

Astrid looped her arm through his and traced the muscles in his forearm. "He told me to get back. Protecting me, but when he saw the dragon, he froze on the spot." Sighing, she recalled the fear and disappointment, along with the betrayal of the uncle she'd trusted to keep her safe. "My family was humiliated. Laughed at and scorned by the entire village. It's kind of this thing with the Hoffersons. You'd know if you grew up here."

She shook her head. Continued. "But anyways, there was this one time a little while after it happened. I was outside doing some chores, because my parents were arguing with my uncle inside. Your dad was around. And as I'm just about to work up the courage and ask if I can come back inside, the door busts open, and my uncle Finn comes out with his bag over his shoulder."

She'd stood at the foot of the front steps with confusion in her eyes. Even as a child, she knew that he'd caused her family a great dishonor, but she loved him anyways. When she saw him ready to leave, her little heart broke in two. "He took one look at me and then just brushed right past me," Astrid told him. Hiccup kissed her hair. "I was just standing there in shock, calling after him and trying not to cry. My parents were still yelling at each other inside- my mom didn't want my dad to send him away. And I turned around to run away and ran straight into your dad."

"He knew what was going on?"

"Mhm."

To a girl as small as Astrid, Stoick the Vast had seemed just that-vast. Tall, broad, and eternally stony, she'd always carried an awed sort of respect for the man her parents knelt to. But she'd never really spoken to him without her mother around. He brought out a shyness in her. He'd never paid her much attention either. But after she smacked into his tree trunk of a leg, he'd lifted his brows down at her and then squatted down to her level.

"'Yeh alright?'" she mimicked, remembering Stoick's words. "I wasn't sure if he was talking about my uncle leaving or me running into him, so I just kind of looked away. Told him I was sorry." A nostalgic smile warmed her lips, even at the memory of such an awful day. "He shrugged it off and said, 'I can understand why yer uncle got such a fright now.' And I thought he was being so rude. But then he said, 'It's scary ta have ta protect the ones we love.'"

"My dad said that?" Hiccup breathed. His warm exhale rustled her bangs. "Yeah." She brushed her cheek over the smoothness of his skin and shifted so that her forehead pressed into his shoulder. "I've

been working to restore my family's honor ever since then. Thinking maybe- maybe if he heard what I did, he'd come back to Berk."

Hiccup was quiet for a long time. He tightened his arm around her, deep in thought. And then when she was beginning to feel sleepy, staring at the flickering candle dripping low, he spoke.
"Astrid?"

"Yeah?" she mumbled. "Flightmares have a paralyzing venom." His voice is quiet. "They spray it at their victims as a method of an escape."

Astrid sat up, pulling away so she could look him in the face. "So... What are you saying?"

He tilted his head at her, evaluating her expression, and then leaned in to brush his nose against hers. "I'm saying you don't have to work so hard to restore your honor. You never lost it."

Her exhale was sharp, and it made her chest burn a little. But it was like letting go a breath after holding it for a while. Like she could finally inhale again. All at once, she realized she knew the answer to Fishlegs' last question. She angled her face up to steal his lips against hers.

No. No, this was something much more than infatuation. And that made her feel anything but fearless.

18. Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen.

She woke with smoke in her lungs. A hot, searing burn that tore her awake and set her gasping for clean air. It stung her eyes, made her cough and choke and grasp at her throat. The flames consuming her room were a second priority panic- first, she had to breathe.

"Hiccup?" she rasped, wheezing as her hands searched the sheets for the boy she'd fallen asleep with. Squinting into the thick blanket of black smoke, she winced and searched for his shape.

Fire ate at the foot of her furs. She whimpered and kicked them off, scrambling out of her bed and to the floor. Her knees hit the floorboards with a painful slam that would leave black and blue splotches across her already scarred skin.

"Hiccup?" she cried again, burning tears blurring her vision. He'd been there when she fell asleep- his leg had been tangled with hers, and his arm had been locked around her stomach. But his mask was gone. His staff no longer leaned against the window, and where his furs and shirt had been shucked and left on the desk, she could only see a blaze. "Hiccup!"

The door was a tall column of fire. The curtains at the window were disintegrating by the second. Panic gripped her chest with a strong fist and squeezed so tightly that her vision doubled. Or maybe that was the shriek of her lungs demanding oxygen. Her hand fisted in the neckline of her nightgown, her knuckles going white as she tried to

draw in even a strand of fresh air. But everything was black and gray and burning, and the sharp ache turned stabbing.

Her head spun. She felt the floor rise up to meet her. Before her eyes fell closed again, she spied the shadow of a beast crawling through the flames.

Astrid awoke with a sharp gasp, her fingers like claws in the bed furs. Her eyes searched the dark room with disorientation, finding no fire, no smoke, and no shadows. There was a pressure on her chest, but as she glanced down, she realized that there was no reason to fear it. Hiccup's head shifted as he stirred, nestled against her breast and fast asleep. Just as she remembered it, his arm stretched lazily across her belly. His torso rose and fell with the gentle rhythm of his breathing.

She let her head fall back against the pillow. Trembling, she forced her fingers to uncurl from the furs and rub her tired eyes. Her heart still hammered in her ribcage.

Swallowing down the knot in her throat, she rested her hands on Hiccup's head. She felt the ridges of his braids and the soft texture of his bangs and let the scent of his hair soothe her as it stained her fingers. In his sleep, he gave a heavy and content sigh. He'd become a regular visitor in her bed, and most nights she spent waiting up for him to slip in the window and greet her with kisses and nuzzles. The sound of his breathing sent her to sleep. The ghost of his lips woke her at sunrise.

Like something straight from her nightmare, Fishlegs' words came back to her- You're the first human besides his mother he's ever interacted with. His attachment... I just don't think it's a good idea.

She paused, and then resumed her absent caresses. For some reason that thought had stuck like a battle axe between her ribs. The thought that she was simply available. The idea that she was interchangeable for the feral boy she'd found in the woods. It felt like dread, and something more painful than frightening. For so long she'd tried to convince herself that this was nothing, that this attraction to him would end with the dragon war. But she realized over and over again that it wasn't fading with time. All efforts to hold onto her heart had been left at the cliff where they shared their first kiss.

"Hiccup?" she tested. Saying his name was an eerie echo from the dream she'd just had. "Are you awake?"

His exhale fluttered the fabric of her nightgown, tickling her chest. He was silent, and for a second, she thought that he was too deep in his unconsciousness to hear her. But then he replied, "Maybe. Are you a dream?"

"No."

"Then yes." His voice was thick and slurred, obviously not yet ready to articulate. He tightened his grip around her stomach and nuzzled into her breast.

She brushed her nails across his scalp like her mother used to do

when she was little. She was rewarded with a sleepy purr. "Do you think you're just infatuated with me?" she whispered, glad he faced away from her apprehensive expression.

"Remind me what that means," he mumbled.

It was a difficult emotion to describe. There was no way to word it so that his half-awake brain would really understand. So she settled for, "It's when you feel like we do, but for the wrong reasons." After a moment, she added, "Would you want me if I wasn't the one who found you?"

His reply was a contemplative groaning noise. "You're Astrid," he muttered, and then pulled at her nightgown until he could slip his hand beneath and rest his palm on the bare skin of her waist.

She remembered him saying that once, a long time ago. When they'd first met, and she'd asked him how she knew she could trust him. He'd reached out his gloved hand and brushed his knuckles across her cheek and said those same two words- You're Astrid. The first human friend he'd made. It brought her no comfort to hear that his explanation was still the same.

As if nothing had changed since that day except the amount of her skin she let him touch.

The blade of the battle axe in her chest bore dangerously close to her heart. She could feel its edge pressing into the throbbing muscle. She struggled with words, her mouth forming phrases and questions she wasn't quite sure how to voice. But by the time she'd decided there was nothing more to be said, his breathing had already evened out again. His fingers twitched in sleep.

She pressed her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. This had all started because she wanted to save Berk. Her village, her friends, her family- she wanted to make their home safe. Now she was tied to this man by less than honorable intentions. Her village suspected her. Her friends were either betraying her or in danger because of her. And her family was ashamed of her. But nothing hurt as much as the idea that maybe Hiccup would leave her side the minute someone else came along. The thought that maybe he could just as easily fall for Ruffnut or any other village woman.

And nothing terrified her like the thought that she might still want him anyways.

!

The Thorston twins ended up having a funny way with the dragons. It was hard to get them to be silent, to remind them that the louder they were, the more chance they had of being caught. But the dragons loved their whispered bickering, the way they played and rough-housed. The Monstrous Nightmare, as always, observed and steamed from his pen, but the Nadder and the Zippleback loved chasing Ruffnut and Tuffnut around the arena. The Gronkle was content to try and demand snuggles from Astrid while she cleaned out the cages.

It eased her stress a little to watch them interact. She could tell that the two were growing attached to the dragons. Every time Astrid shook her head and sent them away from the kill ring with a steely

frown, they pouted and complained until they were out of earshot. When she lifted the gate for them to come in and help, they scrambled in like kids on Snoggletog. Their enthusiasm was a comfort. They would stand with her when everything came out of the woodwork.

"Astrid!" Ruffnut called over in a voice that was loud enough to make the girl cringe. She finished spreading the last of the fresh hay over the Gronkle's pen and pushed to her feet.

"Yeah?" She ducked out into the main floor, wiping the sweat from her forehead on her arm-warmer. Keeping her answer low, she tried to coax her friend's voice quieter by example.

The girl jogged over, leaving her brother to be playfully gnawed on by Stormfly. "So we want to name the Zippleback," she informed Astrid matter-of-factly. Gesturing towards the dragon in question, she pointed at the head sniffing Tuffnut's boots. It reared with an offended growl and sneezed a spark. "That one's Belch. And the one with the gas is Barf."

A smile threatened Astrid's mouth. She wiped her hands off on her shirt and nodded. "Okay. Barf and Belch."

"Do you think we could fly them?" Ruffnut asked then. Her eyes glittered with mischief. "Like the dragon riders?"

The amusement that had been tugging at the corners of her lips dropped, and Astrid slid her gaze away. That line of conversation was too close to the secret she kept hidden in the cove and in the unlit hours of her bedroom. "Not yet," she answered, shaking her head. "Wait until... Wait a little longer, okay?"

Ruff rolled her eyes and ughhhed. But then the Gronkle was nudging her way under the girl's arm, and the blonde was distracted by a snuffling hug.

Astrid leaned against the entrance to the pen and watched the Viking completely melt with affection. It was a strange and wonderful sight, and it quelled the anxieties that told her that Berk would never accept the dragons. Watching the twins in the arena soothed her doubts and made her think that everything might turn out alright.

Everything- including her ambiguous relationship with Hiccup. A snatch of one of their conversations bubbled to the forefront of her thoughts. A discussion they'd had while his hands were beneath her nightgown and her body throbbed with want. Astrid blushed furiously.

"So, if I asked you something, could you keep it from your brother?" She didn't have anything lethal to play with, as she was wont to do when she needed to be threatening, so she casually ran her fingers over one of the sharp studs of her shoulder guards.

"Depends," Ruffnut replied honestly. She looked over at Tuffnut with shifty eyes and then fixed them on the other girl. "What's it about?"

Astrid willed a blush to keep out of her cheeks. She tried to shrug

it off, like it was something they discussed every day.
"Sex."

That got Ruff's attention. Her blonde brows shot upwards, and she gave Astrid a slow grin. "What's this? Astrid Hofferson actually recognizes the draw of sexual relations between a man and a woman?"

Her expression went flat. "Forget it. Not interested."

Moving to go tend to her Nadder, Astrid pushed away from the stone wall and started towards Stormfly. The other girl grabbed her arm to stop her, though, pulling her back. "Woah woah woah, I'll be good. I'll be good."

Astrid shot her a glare and snatched her elbow from her grasp, but she stilled and folded her arms over her chest. "Not a soul hears about this, understand?"

"May I be ripped to shreds and eaten by a Night Fury," Ruff swore. She made a show of sewing her mouth shut. Astrid tried to picture Toothless eating the girl, but all that came to mind was the dragon rolling on his back and his tongue flopping to the side.

Still unsure, the blonde looked across the ring to be sure that Tuffnut hadn't moved. "I just wanted to know-" she began with an uncomfortable swallow. The toe of her boot ground absently at a crack in the foundation. "The first time. Does it really hurt like they say?"

"Mmmm." Ruffnut scrunched her face up, her nose twisting to the side. "Depends. Not for me. Did for Thornbelle."

Astrid thought of the girl mentioned- a few years older than the rest of them, she'd been pressed into a contractual engagement much like her own. Her husband was a decade her senior and a man of no small means. She was considering the thought when she was suddenly struck with realization. "Wait- you?"

Ruff's smirk was distant, bordering on nostalgic. "Remember the Meathead clan's visit last summer?"

Astrid frowned. Her cheeks felt warm. This wasn't a direction she intended on their conversation going. "Does your family know?"

She snorted and shook her head. "No. But I am a person, despite what everyone thinks. Not just a prettier version of Tuff."

"Nobody said that."

"Maybe not in so many words." Ruff inspected her fingernails as she used her other hand to scratch at the Gronkle's ears. "He gets free reign of the village. Runs around without any complaints from our parents. I learn sewing and cooking and house-running, and I wait for the day the Ingermans come to talk to my dad."

She shrugged. "My brother gets to be his own person. I get to be who they want me to be."

"So you slept with a Meathead?" Astrid gave her a skeptical glance.

There was a curious feeling tickling her throat, an empathy paired with an odd jealousy.

"I decided to make my own decisions," she said as if in correction. "And I don't regret it. I'll do it again next summer. Maybe you try to make everyone else happy, but not me."

Her eyes slipped over to Stormfly, thinking of the first night they'd gone flying together. She recalled the freedom, the rush of adrenaline, the excitement. When she'd told Hiccup that the one thing that felt right was the wind on her skin, she wasn't just avoiding scarier thoughts. Flying was the first thing she took for herself. The one thing she'd keep. That must've been how Ruffnut felt.

"So it's true then? You're getting ready for the wedding?"

Astrid snorted and rolled her eyes, shaking her head.

Ruff bit at her nails. "It didn't really hurt. Just make sure he spends a lot of time touching you first. I mean, as long as Snot doesn't have like some giant, dragon-esque-

"I wasn't asking because of Snot," she interrupted, unwilling to let her finish that sentence. She tried not to flinch when she felt the other girl's wide eyes on her face. After what Ruffnut had just confessed, she didn't think the girl had any room to judge. "I told somebody I would ask."

The suspicion didn't fade from her features. "Is this somebody planning on putting his-

"No!" Astrid hissed, then remembered she was trying to be somewhat honest. That was such a strange concept lately. "Yes? Maybe- I don't know."

She didn't have the opportunity to find out Ruffnut's reaction, to see if the girl would pry for more information. Their conversation was suddenly cut short by the blast of the raid alarm, the deafening horn blaring through the previously quiet night.

Astrid straightened, terror choking her. She wasn't sure when raids had gone from being unfortunate nuisances to an event she dreaded. "Hiccup," she breathed, taking a step forward. Then she noticed the panicked state of the dragons in the ring. They looked to and fro with acute apprehension, making nervous barks and snarls. Stormfly fixed her rider in her yellow eyes and spread her wings unhappily.

Tuffnut ran to them, and she clenched her fists and readied for action. Adrenaline shot through her veins. Her heart already pounded with it. "Okay, you guys. Get the dragons in their cages before anyone else sees them out. Do not let anyone catch you." Jogging over to the rack of weapons kept by the entrance, she quickly selected an axe and stomped on the handle. It flew into the air, and she expertly grabbed it right-side up. "After they're back in their pens, come find me. Keep the village safe but kills down. Got it?"

"Got it," the twins answered in unison.

Astrid didn't wait to give them any details. She cranked the gate open just enough to slide under and ran.

In the distance, Berk was already glowing. She could hear the crackle of flames, could see the flecks casting shadows over rooftops and bridges. An explosion crashed in the distance, followed by the far off sound of someone's scream.

It was odd that such disaster was striking so soon. Usually it took the dragons an hour or so to cause that sort of chaos after the alarm started to blow. Astrid realized with a sinking stomach that the nearer she drew to the rest of the village, the more dragons she could see. They were coming in droves, screeching and shrieking as they flew overhead. The air was dark with their silhouettes.

"Odin's ghost," she whispered as she came upon the thick of it. She dodged swinging doors, swarming Terrors, mothers rushing their children towards Gothi's mountain. A bright purple Zippleback landed on a nearby roof and coughed threatening sparks in her direction.

She was sprinting past her own house when something suddenly hooked around her waist. Thinking it was a dragon's tail, she shrieked and squirmed, but then Hiccup was crushing a gloved hand against her mouth and pulling her into the shadows. He pressed her to the wall where he climbed in her window every night, and she blinked wide-eyed up at his grotesque mask.

Astrid yanked his hand away. "What's going on?" she asked, her voice low. "Why are there so many of them?"

"I'm not sure." His answer sounded out of breath and muffled. "They didn't get away with a lot last time. The queen probably wants to outnumber us."

"You really think we can find her?" Astrid flinched as someone ran past the house and Hiccup angled them farther into the dark. If they did- if they finally located the nest and confirmed Hiccup's theory, they could go to Stoick tomorrow. They would be able to sail to the island, take out the queen, and end the madness. It suddenly seemed like an impossible feat.

"_I_ can find her," he amended. His hands slid to her upper arms and held her against the wall. "It won't be safe like my nest. The dragons might attack the minute they see an intruder."

"More reason for me to go with you," she insisted. "You'll need backup."

"No," Hiccup said with finality. She clenched her jaw but didn't argue. "The best place for you to be is here, protecting-"

"Protecting the dragons," she interrupted sullenly, letting her head fall back with a scowl. "Fine. Got it."

He was still. For a moment, she wasn't sure why he'd fallen so silent, but then he pushed back his mask. His gaze was a little stunned, a little confused, and heated with a fire she recognized easily enough. Taking a step closer, he brushed a sweat-drenched

piece of hair out of her eyes. "I was going to tell you to protect the villagers."

A few heartbeats of noise and discord passed as he stared down at her, and then she found herself shoved hard against the wall. Astrid wasn't sure if she rose up to meet him or if he crashed down to her, but their lips clashed together in a way that was neither gentle nor patient. The handle of her borrowed axe slipped away, forgotten. His chest bore hard against hers, and his palms held her cheeks so that she couldn't pull away if she tried. Desire raked through her belly.

Her hands lifted to his face, fingers threading through his hair and knocking his mask to the ground. She knew she had things to do, no time to waste. She knew that every moment she spent beneath the warm press of his body was a moment that the dragons used to ransack and destroy, but desperation tore at her. It was as if he'd answered a question she'd never posed, made a promise she'd never asked of him. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and every stumbling skip beat the words she couldn't say.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

"You have to go," he mumbled against her mouth, but he made no move to release her. He traced her waist down to her hips and tugged them greedily against his own. Hot and relentless, his tongue twisted past her lips and tangled with hers. Against her jaw, his facial hair burned and scraped. But the slight sting kept her grounded, reminded her what she had to do.

So she broke the kiss, her fingers still buried in his braid. "If you don't come back to me in one piece, I swear to Frigga, Hiccup, I'll-

She was silenced with another hard press of his mouth. This one much milder, but with no less scorch beneath the surface. He tore himself away and gasped like it hurt him to do so. "Keep them safe," he swallowed, breathing hard. "_Be_ safe."

Astrid nodded and somehow summoned the will to release him. He backed away, his hand finding hers and squeezing it until he was just fingertips skimming her knuckles. Then he disappeared around the corner. She tried to run after him, but she was pressed back by a gust of wind and a pair of black leathery wings.

In the distance, as he disappeared, someone screamed, "_Night Fury!_"

19. Chapter 19

It is almost four am and I have to teach in the morning, so I am posting this now and will proof read it tomorrow. A thousand apologies for any typos, run ons, etc etc. I've written almost eight thousand words today and am sure that any editing I did would be worthless in my brain-fried state.

****Chapter Nineteen.****

The night stretched long. The dragons snarled and charged with a new spitefulness, likely the work of whatever force spurred them on. They seemed to have doubled in numbers from the last raid. No matter how many Astrid scared away from the herds, the storehouses, the homes, there were always more to take their place.

Her arms were tired from swinging her axe flat-first. It was an unnatural movement that took more strength than a normal slice. Her throat rasped sorely from shouting and coughing on smoke. Hours had gone by, and they'd already lost an enormous amount of livestock. The dragons' fleet had thinned, since so many of them had already gotten away with kills, but many still remained. And yet there'd been no sign of a Night Fury since the alarm first blared.

"Astrid!" Stoick the Vast called out as she jogged to the main square. He'd just smashed his mace into the hide of a young Zippleback, and its wounded screech made her cringe. "Have yeh seen Snotlout?"

"He was on the west bank with the twins last time I saw him," she answered, pulling up short as the Zippleback took off and nearly collided with her in pained disorientation. "They were checking on the Acks' fields."

The chief wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his arm. "If yeh see him, tell him to report to the Great Hall. He needs post-raid training."

"You think they're done for the night?" she asked, scanning the square in evaluation. It did seem like more were leaving than coming now. Perhaps they were realizing there was nothing left to take, only fights to be had.

Stoick shook his head. "Can't be sure, with that dragon rider showin' his tail. But all the Nightmares have gone, and the rest seem ta be following."

Astrid nodded shortly. "Got it. I'll see if he's around." Switching her axe to her non-dominant hand, she flexed her fingers and gave her wrist a twist. Both were sore from gripping the heavy weapon for hours.

She couldn't shake the feeling that Hiccup and Toothless should have been back already. The moon had been high when they'd left, but it was dropping low now. When he'd first taken off, she'd been concerned that one of the villagers' crossbows or bolas might catch him, but she'd raced to the edge of the cliff-sides to watch the Night Fury's prosthetic tail flick in the distance. And that was the last she'd seen of them.

Astrid looked back in the direction they'd disappeared, clenching her jaw. Then she flicked her eyes towards the west bank and her friends. She knew he'd told her to stay behind, but that was long ago. There was a very good chance he needed her more than he'd expected to.

She turned on her heel, sprinting back towards her house. It was difficult to believe it'd been that same night that he'd held her so

close she could feel his heart beating in his chest. Luckily, though, she could get proof. As she darted into the flickering shadows set behind her home by the flames ravaging Berk, she immediately dropped to her knees and began running her hands along the grass.

It took her a long moment of searching. She began to panic that someone had already found it, and where they'd found it. Astrid was just beginning to lose hope when her fingers brushed something leathery. Relief consumed her. She grabbed Hiccup's mask in one hand and took off towards the arena.

"Stormfly!" she was already shouting when she skidded under the underpass of the kill ring. It was only by the gods blessing that there hadn't been any captured dragons to add to Stoick's collection. She stopped by the weapons rack to toss a belt of throwing knives over her shoulder and then shoved the base aside to retrieve the rope she'd been using to hold onto her Nadder.

Astrid's arms were almost too weak to crank the dragon's cage open. Sweat dripped down the back of her neck, and she growled through her gritted teeth. Then the lever gave, and the door pulled ajar. The Nadder squawked with excitement and skittered out to lick her rider.

She smiled reluctantly. "Hey. I know, I know. Hush, we gotta get out of here." She knotted the rope around the lowest horns on the dragon's neck and then hoisted herself up and over Stormfly's shoulders.

"Don't do it."

At the sound of the voice cutting into the arena, Astrid's heart jumped into her throat. It was neither quiet nor loud, but it was firm. Snotlout watched her with a dark crinkle in his brow. He stood in the doorway, blocking her exit. His eyes dropped to the dragon-face mask clenched in her fist.

"I don't know what you're up to, Astrid, but I'm saying no." He took a step forward, pointing a finger downwards. "You're staying here."

Her first reaction was to sneer. To snarl. To threaten his life. How dare he try and command her around? His father might have been feeding her family, but that gave him no right to treat her like a slave. Then, though, she detected the waver in his voice. It was hidden beneath the hardheaded demand, but it was there, and she knew that he really did want to keep her safe.

In another life, maybe she could have been given a little more time to fall for him. Maybe the engagement wouldn't have turned her off to him completely and she could have returned the feelings he had for her. There were a thousand maybes where things ended the way he wanted them, but none of them included this night. None of them were possible anymore.

"That's the problem, Snot." She petted her uneasy Nadder, hips tilting to steady herself when Stormfly took an apprehensive step forward. "You get to have your say. I have to take mine."

With that, she pressed her knees into the dragon's sides. Stormfly

gave Snotlout a hiss as she charged, and the Viking jumped aside just in time for her already beating wings to just barely graze over his head. The wind stole Astrid's breath the way it always did the first time air surged into her face, and she held on tight.

Once they hit the sky, she pushed the thought of Snot out of her mind. Her gut twisted with dread, thinking of what would happen once she and the dragon returned. She had to come back with Hiccup. The twins and Fishlegs might have kept her secret, but Snotlout wouldn't. She knew where his loyalties laid, and they weren't with her. But that would have to wait. For now, she had to find the Night Fury and his rider.

She stretched the mask out for Stormfly to sniff. "Can you follow this?" she asked over the loud wind roaring in her ears. The dragon screeched and bobbed her head in a gesture that she thought might be a nod. "If not, just follow those dragons ahead, okay?"

She could barely see, but she trusted her Nadder to. On the horizon she could faintly make out the shadow of spread wings, but there was no way of telling how far they were or what kind of dragons they belonged to. Not from this distance. She had to believe they were going the same way Hiccup had been led.

Astrid had been on voyages in search of the dragons' nest before. She didn't like it, once she'd gone and realized what a waste it was, but she'd been with her father. That was nothing like flying at speeds their ships couldn't touch, racing over a sparkling black ocean with icy winter wind raking like fingers through her hair and clothes. If she hadn't been so concerned, it would have been exhilarating. She thought about how useful the dragons could be, if Berk let them. How much of their lives could change.

Somehow she'd known that Stormfly would take her to Helheim's Gate. It was where they always lost ships to the rocky waters, to the fog and to the dragons that lurked in their mist. It was no less fearsome when they came upon it, and before dipping into the smoke-like vapors, the Nadder made an uneasy sound and turned a roundabout.

"Hey, no no no," she murmured to the dragon, leaning over to give her a pat on her rough neck. "We've gotta do this, girl. I'm scared too."

After a few more encouraging pats, Stormfly eased back towards the fog. Astrid breathed a sigh of relief and kept rubbing her horns in what she hoped was a comforting manner. When they dropped close to the water's surface and began darting through tall rock formations that lorded tall and intimidating over them, the girl swallowed. The air seemed to crackle with some strange electricity, like the storm cloud she'd flown through. Stormfly had taken that on fearlessly, though. The implication was a fearful thrill down her spine.

She could hear the other dragons before she could see them. They clicked and murmured and chattered all around them, and she kept thinking she saw talons out of the corner of her eyes, the flash of wings. Swallowing hard, Astrid forced herself not to cower at the sounds.

"Hiccup?" she called out, surprised at how her voice wavered.

"Hiccup, are you around? Toothless?" Once more, she leaned over to let Stormfly test the scent of the young man's mask. "Keep looking, Stormy. I know they're here somewhere."

The Nadder took her through the fog and over a beach of rocky sand. The ground was empty, bare, not a dragon in sight. Then she took them up, up, and towards the enormous mountain that seemed to overshadow most of the island. It was rocky and almost completely bereft of flora. When her nose detected sulfur and ash in the air, she realized it wasn't just a mountain. It was a volcano. And Stormfly was taking her inside.

Her world went terrifyingly dark for a moment as they ducked in a hole the size of one of their ships. The echo of dragons all around told her they were close- extremely close- but she was blind to all of them. Then there was a distant glow. A reddish orange light that grew larger and larger, like the opening of a great and fiery mouth. Heat stung Astrid's cheeks, and the very air around them began to steam.

Then the opening exploded into a wide cavern, and Stormfly immediately shot upwards. Her lungs burned with every hot inhale. She felt sweat begin to trail down her spine.

And she saw them- the dragons. Hundreds, if not thousands of them rested on cliffs and behind rocks. Every species she knew, along with ones she didn't all sat around the large glowing pit in the center of the room. Stormfly instantly located a small gathering of Nadders and landed near them. Astrid thought they'd snap and hiss at the sight of her, but they hardly seemed to notice. They kept curled into their strange little nest.

"Hiccup?" she whispered, dragging her eyes over the vast room. "Are you in here?" It was embarrassing that she was afraid to raise her voice, but she was as terrified as she'd ever been, a single human standing inside a nest of dragons. It was what they'd been searching for for centuries, and they'd found it. She'd found it.

Her gaze caught the spread of dark black wings on a jutting cliffside farther below, and her heart lurched. That was Toothless, undoubtedly, but his saddle was empty. The Night Fury seemed to be snarling and snapping at something in the shadows.

"Stormfly," Astrid mumbled, not wanting to speak too loudly lest she attract attention to herself. "Can you get me down there?"

The Nadder was obviously apprehensive, jerking her head this way and that, but she followed her rider's request and glided down the few dozen feet. Her talons dug into the earth as she landed, and Toothless whirled around with snapping jaws before he recognized the dragon and her rider. His head tilted in confusion.

"Hey," she greeted, jumping down from Stormfly's back. Her knees threatened to buckle under the rush of adrenaline in her veins, but luckily her fighting instincts kicked in. She held up Hiccup's mask. "Where is he?"

Toothless' expression dropped into annoyance, and he turned back to growl in the other direction. At first she wasn't sure what she was looking at- the shadows cast by the eerie glow of the pit danced

sickeningly along the walls- but then she made out the shape of something without wings slowly crawling along a narrow ledge. Hiccup, she realized, and panic gripped her when she realized how high up he was, how little space he had for his feet.

She rushed forward to the edge, where he left Toothless. "Hiccup!" she hissed, and the shadow straightened. Not quite crouching, he turned his head to fix her in a scathing glare.

"What are you doing here, Astrid?" At first, she was taken aback by how utterly inhuman he sounded. His voice was a low snarl, a gargled bite of consonants spoke in a threatening tone. "I told you to stay!"

Her frown deepened. "It's been hours since you left! I thought you were dead." Toeing the edge, she made the mistake of checking to see how far up they were. The first swirl of acrophobia to clench her stomach since learning to fly made her choke. "Hiccup, what are you doing?"

"They won't listen to me!" he said, the answer thrown over his shoulder as he eased further along the ledge. Despite his lack of room to walk, he moved with a grace she recognized. He was in his element, there with the dragons. "I'm trying to get them out of here before it's too late, but they're under her control. I can't get through to them."

"Where is she?" Astrid searched the cavern- for what, she didn't know. Because of what he'd told her about Nightmares living in volcanoes, she suspected it might be a larger but similar species. But there were so many dragons, and none of them seemed to stand out as scarier or more malicious than any of the others.

"You'll see her," Hiccup replied so low she hardly heard him.

Astrid knelt down, trying to see past the large overhang jutting from the rockface and blocking her view of whatever Hiccup was crawling towards. She could make out a dragon she wasn't familiar with preening several yards away. "What is that?"

He didn't answer, creeping towards the creature. It was a bright purple, with skinny arms that it nibbled at and licked. Hiccup called, "Mongrel! Mongrel, it's me!" and the dragon suddenly switched to a vivid red. It shrieked down at the human, irritated and obviously threatened.

"You know that dragon?" she shouted, having to raise her voice a little louder to cross the gaping space between them.

"He's one of my-" he cut off, obviously unsure of what to call it. "One of my brothers. A Hobblegrunt. He brought me to Berk." Taking a step forward, he reached a hand out towards the dragon. It snapped at his outstretched fingertips, and Astrid could hear the clash of his teeth all the way from where she waited. It didn't deter Hiccup, who chattered and bobbed his head at the dragon. "Come on, Mongrel, don't you wanna go home? Let's go see mom!"

The Hobblegrunt faded to a wary orange. Hiccup eased a little closer, trying again to touch his palm to Mongrel's nose like she'd seen him do countless times with Toothless. The Night Fury gave a quiet,

garbled warning. For a second, it looked like the Hobblegrunt was going to let him touch his face.

And then a low, earth-rattling rumble shook the cavern. She shrieked, grabbing the ground for purchase and watching with wide eyes as Hiccup stumbled. The Hobblegrunt turned a violent scarlet and slashed his claws out towards his human brother. They caught him across the chest, sending Hiccup several steps backwards, and he gripped the wall and gasped in pain.

"Hiccup!" Astrid screamed, forgetting where she was. Toothless snarled, hissing furiously and gripping his talons against the edge like he might leap for it at any moment.

"I'm alright!" Hiccup grunted, his tone sounding anything but. "Keep your voice down before-"

She quickly figured out why she was supposed to be quiet. Everywhere she looked, dragons suddenly skittered out of sight. The ground shook again, sending her sprawling on her hands and knees. She felt Stormfly approach behind her, nipping at her shirt and trying to pull her away. "Hiccup, what-"

A massive claw suddenly shot out of the glowing pit, scraping down the cavern wall with talons the size of Astrid herself. Her heart slammed against her breastbone in terrified panic. She gasped a whimper as rock crumbled like dust, dragons screeching and fleeing as quickly as possible.

"Hiccup!" she cried, "It's time to go!"

He looked back at her, his face pale as he evaluated the panic in her expression. She knew he had to have known about the massive beast, because he seemed unshaken by the enormous claws scratching deep gashes into the stone wall. Then he turned back to the Hobblegrunt. "Mongrel, come on!" he insisted, adding clicks and growls in dragonese. She couldn't see very well, but she thought he was grasping at his chest.

Toothless barked at his rider. Astrid shouted his name again. The gargantuan claw was descending back into the foggy pit, and she wasn't sure how long they had until it struck out again.

"Mongrel!" Hiccup tried, his voice almost inaudible beneath the noise of beating wings and dragons' panic. "Please!"

"Hiccup, you have to leave him!" she pleaded. "We'll come back for him, but we have to get out!"

The cavern shook again, and Astrid reached her arms up to grasp at Stormfly's neck. Her legs rubbery and weak with fear, she clumsily climbed onto the Nadder's back. Her dragon shifted nervously, obviously wanting to take off, but Astrid stilled her with a hand to her brow.

Suddenly the air seemed to split in two with the most dreadful roar she'd ever heard in her life. It was the kind of bellow that ripped into her nightmares and echoed in the back of her mind when she pictured the destruction of her village. A pure and acute horror sliced cleanly through her, and her begging turned

shrill.

"_Hiccup!_"

He seemed to snap out of his stubbornness. One hand pressed tight to his torso, he turned and scrambled back towards their little platform. Relief mixed with a sharp dread. The closer he got, the clearer the blood leaking through his fingers became. His eyes fixed on her, saw her panic. And then just before the claw thrust from the evil glow, he leapt.

For a brief, hysterical second she thought he was going to come short. But he was more dragon than she gave him credit for- he used the rock face to propel himself further, and he crashed onto the cliff just in time to turn and see the queen destroy the ledge where he'd been. The Hobblegrunt shrieked and tried to escape, but a sharp talon caught him, and he was drawn down.

Hiccup screamed with anguish.

"Toothless, get him!" Astrid shouted over the deafening rumble and crashing. The Night Fury wasted no time in biting at his rider's furs, dragging him from his crouch. Stumbling, his eyes fixed on the chasm, Hiccup allowed himself to be bullied into the saddle. Fisting his hand in his shirt, he slipped his foot into the pedal and muttered something to Toothless.

The two took off, and Stormfly was all too enthusiastic to follow. Astrid was nearly thrown from the Nadder's back as they shot towards the opening, where other dragons were quickly escaping. She was afraid of falling, but she was afraid to slow down. She was afraid to look over her shoulder, but she was afraid not to. A Zippleback's wing sliced at her arm as they beat in a frantic escape. She yelped and ducked low against Stormfly's back. That soul-shuddering roar thundered once more, and then they were pressed forward by a blast of heat.

Later, she realized it was fire stinging her back.

"C'mon!" she cried, pressing her knees harder into Stormfly's sides to urge her forward. It took them a moment to catch up to the impossibly fast Night Fury. They shot out into the frigid night, and the icy wind was both a painful and welcome sensation. She gulped in the cold air, as if the chilly temperature could settle her racing heart. Adrenaline surged hot and painful through her veins.

She glanced over and tried to catch Hiccup's gaze. He didn't look up, his eyes glaring down at his hands, but he tilted his chin just so to let her know he felt her presence.

It took a long time for the dragons disperse. They fell away one by one, dropping away as the two left the island in the distance. After a while, her pulse calmed its frantic tattoo. Stormfly stopped her fearful twitching and shaking. Sometimes she had to press the Nadder to stay alongside Toothless, but she didn't try calling after them. She was dying to talk about what had happened. Her thoughts were flying faster than _they_ were. But Hiccup was quiet.

So they rode back to Berk in silence. Every now and then she'd glance over to see if the hard set of his jaw had relaxed, but it never did.

Her fingers began to freeze on the ropes attached to Stormfly's neck. Her teeth started to chatter. It was always colder flying alone than it was with him.

The first thing she did after they landed outside the kill ring was cross the space between them and brush her lips across Hiccup's forehead. His arms wrapped around her waist as he pressed his crown to her breast, and for a moment she let him hold her tight.

"It's my fault," he whispered into her. "I brought him here."

"Shh. No."

Then she felt the disturbing wetness of blood dampening her shirt.

Astrid laced her fingers in his hair and gently disengaged herself. Looking down, she saw that- sure enough- her stomach was stained almost black. Her eyes flicked to Hiccup's chest, where she knew he'd been mauled. "How deep are they?" she murmured, unable to see in the dark.

The village was dead quiet. Too quiet, for the hours following a raid. All of the fires had been put out, and smoke rose in hissing stacks from blackened buildings. But not a soul was in sight. They didn't have long before dawn.

"I don't know." His voice was low. He shook his head and looked down at the scraps of his shirt. "It doesn't hurt that bad. But I think it's bleeding a lot."

Astrid leaned down to give his lips a quick kiss, and then she pushed away. "Let me put Stormfly to bed. I'm taking you to Gothi." It wasn't a hard decision to make anymore. She'd take him home and waltz him right in front of her mother, if her mother had any medical training.

So she did. The Nadder was grateful to go back to the confines of her cage, effectively rattled by the evening's events. She gave the dragon warm nuzzles before stepping out of the pen and cranking the door shut. Then she shucked her borrowed weapons and left them by the entrance.

She climbed into the saddle behind him and gently instructed him to the sky-scraping mountain that overlooked the sleeping village. Though she wasn't sure if Gothi would be home, she had to check there first. The elder might have already been in the Great Hall helping with other injuries, but Astrid thought it more prudent to avoid crowds for as long as possible. Toothless landed as gently as possible on the old woman's porch. The boards creaked and shuddered anyhow.

"C'mere," she murmured, pulling Hiccup to his feet. Her heart began to pick up again at the thought of revealing her biggest secret to yet another Viking, but it was almost a residual fear. After what she'd seen tonight, nothing could scare her now.

His mouth set in a tight line, he let her pull him to the front door, sticking close to her back. She could have let go of his hand while she rapped her knuckles at the aged wood, but she didn't. The cold

blood on her shirt was making it stick to her skin in an incredibly uncomfortable manner.

When nobody answered at first, she knocked louder. Astrid was about to peek in a window, to start shouting, when the door suddenly swung open and the village elder banged her staff in aggravation at her side.

Astrid took a deep breath to steady herself. Then she said, "Gothi. I'm sorry. We need your help."

The wrinkled old woman squinted up at them, the lines around her eyes and mouth deepening as she looked from the girl to her companion and back. She pointed a gnarled finger at Hiccup, and Astrid winced at her huff of recognition. _Everyone_ had heard about the dragon riders. She looked beyond them, at Toothless. The elder scowled accusingly and muttered something unintelligible under her breath at the blonde before moving to shut the door in their faces.

"Wait!" she yelped, reaching forward to hold it in place. Her gaze cut to Hiccup. "Tell her who you are. Tell her your name."

He furrowed his brows at her, his palm pressed to his bleeding chest. But then he looked down at the little woman. "Hiccup?"

"No," she hissed. "Your full name." Even _she_ wasn't sure what that was, but she knew Gothi would. Gothi knew every detail of Berk's history.

The crease of confusion in his brow deepened. "Hiccup Horrendous Haddock," he said promptly. "The third."

Just as Astrid had expected, the elder's jaw fell. She rubbed a fist into her eyes and then shuffled forwards. Gripping Hiccup's arm in a clawed hand, she pulled him down to her level and pinched his chin between her thumb and forefinger. Gothi stared at his features with intense concentration.

"It's him," Astrid told her. "He's Stoick's son." Hiccup's head whipped to look at her at the sound of his father's name, but the old woman jerked him back in place. He winced. "He's hurt. I think he needs stitches."

Gothi blinked in wonder, then pushed the young man away. Astrid thought she was going to try and shut the door again, but she only waddled back inside and gestured them in. The girl sighed in relief.

Hiccup whispered a quiet command to the Night Fury, who gave a short nod before slinking around to the back of the house. Then he let Astrid pull him inside. They followed the village elder to a tiny room shoved in the back corner of the house. Hiccup was shoved roughly onto a bed that hardly seemed big enough to hold a child. Astrid was pushed into the corner, and Gothi pointed at a rickety chair in a wordless command. She sat and shrugged at Hiccup's baffled expression.

The old woman left the room for a while, clattering around noisily. They could hear her walking stick thudding against the floorboards as she walked, the clink and clang of bowls crashing together. Astrid

wanted to move from her seat to be near Hiccup, but she was almost afraid of what the elder would do if she left her chair. The feral boy held her gaze as they waited, and she gave him a weak smile.

Eventually Gothi reappeared, almost slamming down a heavy bowl and a plate loaded with supplies. She disappeared again and then returned with a candle and a dark bottle. With a wordless grumble, she indicated for Hiccup to remove his shirt, and though the action made him cringe, he followed orders without an argument. In the light, the four slashes stretching from his collarbone to his sternum looked vicious and painful. Astrid bit down on her thumbnail in an attempt not to comment.

Gothi handed the bottle to Hiccup, gesturing for him to take a drink. He did, though he coughed and spluttered and wheezed after a single sip. "What _is _that?" he rasped, apparently unsure whether to direct the question towards Astrid or Gothi.

"Alcohol," the younger of the two answered. "Drink it. It'll ease the pain."

He gave her an unhappy twist of his nose but obeyed. His second attempt went a little better, though he still coughed at the harsh taste.

After the elder picked up a threaded needle and began to work on his chest, time seemed to slow. Astrid brought her knees to her chest and gnawed at her fingernails. Every wince made her own skin hurt. Every sharp gasp made her bite down a whimper. It was torture. She was surprised, living with dragons as long as he had, that his pale torso wasn't more marred. Those claw marks would certainly be something worth showing off in the Vikings' never ending contest of trophy scars.

After she finished the first bleeding gash, the alcohol seemed to kick in. Hiccup didn't flinch or grit his teeth every time the needle buried in his wound. It eased her concern, and for a long time, the room was quiet. After Gothi washed away the blood and sewed up the three deepest slashes, the injury didn't seem as awful. He was lucky he hadn't been standing just an inch closer, or the Hobblegrunt would have ripped the flesh from his bones.

But she chose not to think on that, out of respect for the poor thing.

She wasn't sure what time it was when the elder pulled away from his chest and gestured Astrid forward. Grateful to be of assistance, she immediately jumped from her chair and crossed the tiny room in two steps. Gothi plunked the heavy bowl she'd seen earlier in her hand. Then, using one crooked finger, she dipped into the bowl and dabbed a greenish paste into Hiccup's cuts.

She motioned for Astrid to do the same. With happy obedience, she buried her own fingertip in the mixture and gently applied it to the edge of one wound. With a sniff, Gothi gave her a nod of approval.

And then she wiped her hand on Astrid's bloodied shirt and turned on her heel. She scooted out of the room and shut the door with

something just short of a slam. The blonde blinked in stunned surprise after the woman, hearing her walking stick rap against every step as she climbed the stairs to her own bedroom.

"Um." She shook her head and looked back at Hiccup, who shrugged.

He reached over and set the bottle down on the side table. "She's weird," he muttered, and then took Astrid by the hips. He pulled her down, despite her protests, until she was sitting on his lap. "And _that_ is disgusting."

A smile threatened her lips. "Nobody drinks it for the taste," she said, picking back up with the paste where Gothi left off. She was careful not to press too hard against his skin or snag his stitches as she dabbed the poultice along the claw marks. "Not _that_ stuff, anyways."

He ended up being a very easy-going patient, once she took up the job. Though it might have been the alcohol in his blood softening his manner, not the person applying the medicine. He was quiet and thoughtful as she worked. He pressed the occasional kiss to her neck and shoulder. She knew he was still grieving the Hobblegrunt's death, but she didn't bring it up. If Hiccup wanted to forget for the moment, she would let him.

When the four lacerations were effectively covered, she set the bowl down and picked up the thick roll of bandages from the plate of supplies. Astrid straddled his hips to get an easier angle before wrapping his chest. It went without saying that tying herself in her bindings was considerably easier than wrapping someone else. She'd bandaged enough wounds to know how to do it, but the final product was still sloppy and askew.

"That'll have to do for tonight," she told him with a sigh. Her hands slid to his neck. She lowered her forehead to touch his. "How do you feel?"

"Warm," he murmured.

The corners of her lips twitched in faint amusement. "I bet. Do you think you can make it to my room?"

He nodded. "I'm fine. That stuff made my head buzz a little bit, but other than that, I'm good."

"Good." She crawled off the bed and set about cleaning up their mess. She had no money on her to leave for Gothi, but she could at least tidy up before slipping away into the night. She scrubbed out the bowl with a damp cloth she found in the kitchen, leaving the sewing needle in plain sight and throwing out their trash. Then when she was satisfied with the state of things, she went back to help Hiccup stand.

He seemed to be telling the truth. There was no wobble or waver to his step, so she didn't need to help him outside. She only barely remembered to throw his ruined shirt around her shoulders before they left. Toothless immediately appeared at the sound of their footsteps, panting happily and giving Hiccup enthusiastic licks. After he settled, they climbed on his back and glided easily down to the rest of the village.

She was worried about Hiccup climbing up to her window with his injury, but he insisted he was fine. So she tiptoed inside her house, pausing to listen for her father's snores before rushing up the stairs. By the time she reached her room, Hiccup was already straddling her window sill and waving goodbye to Toothless.

"You know we have to go to the chief tomorrow," she began, hardly looking at him as she moved to her desk to change into her nightgown. She set down his tattered shirt and reached for her own. It felt so good to be able to strip out of her top, stained as it was with Hiccup's blood. "We have to tell them about the queen."

In her chest, there was suddenly a blooming feeling of relief. Of satisfaction. So long she'd laid awake with the fear that there was no queen at all. That the dragons attacked of their own accord and always would. But what she'd witnessed tonight was both terrible and wonderful. There was an enormous and powerful monster controlling the dragons. But monsters had been killed before.

"I know," he answered, shutting the window with a firm hand. His words weren't slurred, but his voice did sound a little odd. "And I guess- I guess I'll meet my dad tomorrow."

"Mhm." Astrid stepped out off her skirt and kicked it aside. Then she pulled off her leggings too before drawing her thin nightgown over her head. She wanted to undo her sweaty plait, but not while he was in the room. Turning around, she leaned back against her desk chair.

He stood by the bed, watching her. His expression was unreadable, and the faint smile she'd been carrying faltered. Was he nervous about meeting Stoick? Was he thinking about his lost dragon brother? Did he feel the same kind of apprehensive excitement about accomplishing their mission? She wished she could know what he was thinking when he looked at her with eyes that intense.

As if in answer to her question, he closed the distance between them in two long strides. His arm wrapped around her waist, crushing her to his injured chest, and he ducked his head to claim her mouth. She made a noise of surprise, but it was muffled by the hard kiss. And all at once she was taken back to the shadows cast against the wall of her house. He was kissing her like he might never see her again. She didn't allow herself to wonder if that was true.

Hiccup's fingers dug into her back and hips with a demanding greed. She could taste the alcohol on his tongue as it pressed between her lips and explored the edges of her teeth. It was strong and bitter and mixed with his usual smoky taste in a way that wasn't altogether unpleasant. Heat emanated from him in waves, and she could feel the warmth of his bare stomach and arms through her dress.

"Hiccup?" she breathed, baffled by his sudden urgency. But she couldn't ignore the desire unfurling at the feeling of his hand tracing down her spine, the way she arched into him as it reached her lower vertebrae.

"I want you," he mumbled into her mouth. "Before your chief and my dad and everyone else gets involved. Before everything changes." His hips surged against hers, pressing her into the back of the chair.

"I- I _want_ you."

Her hands shot out to brace herself against the desk. She gasped for air as he kissed along her jaw, finding the tender skin beneath her earlobe and sucking at it. "It's already changed, Hiccup." So much had happened that she'd almost forgotten about Snotlout seeing her with Stormfly. She thought about saying something on the subject, but then his teeth were nipping down her throat and she was distracted. A part of her she couldn't stop made her nod.

She could feel the need in him, the desperate way he tore off the nightgown she'd just slipped on. Pulling her by the hips, he tugged her away from the desk and backed her towards the bed. When her calves hit the mattress, he pressed her back and knelt over her body. He settled between her thighs and buried his fingers in her braid. She gasped as his lips traced the edge of her bindings.

"Take them off," he murmured, though she could hear the way he asked permission in the quiet demand. He'd learned by now how to untie the linen strips, but this was his way of giving her control when his was obviously so weak. She was grateful for that. So this time, she did. Her fingers fumbled for the flat knot, shaking as they yanked at it impatiently. The bindings gave and then he was wasting no time in slipping the entire mess over her head.

Hiccup slowed then. His gaze swept from her crown to her bared body with something akin to reverence. One calloused hand moved to cup the weight of her breast in his palm, and Astrid gasped. His eyes flicked back to her face, and he gently scraped his nails along the tender undersides. He watched as she sank her teeth into her bottom lip and twisted. It was as if his touch connected to a wire running straight to the secret place in the depths of her belly, and when he lowered his mouth to taste the soft flesh, that wire pulled painfully taut.

Her body became something she didn't recognize. A writhing, hungry thing that couldn't have belonged to her. It hummed as his tongue traced her tightening nipples, pulsing with an abrupt and alarming need. Every wet kiss he placed on her skin made her moan. When he began to nibble at sensitive flesh, her thighs parted of their own volition to will him closer.

He obliged, bearing down on her so that she could feel the hard throb of his arousal. The sensation was so foreign and forbidden that she couldn't help but whimper and press into him. The sharp noise he made between his teeth was maddening.

When his mouth began to wander beyond her breasts, a nervous strand of thought tried to break through the haze. It reminded her of her parents sleeping downstairs, of Snotlout's face when he caught her in the kill ring. She quickly silenced it, drawing up a different memory. Ruffnut's determination when she said, "I made my own decisions."

Hiccup's lips ghosted over her ribs, moving lower until he was kissing just above her navel. Then he eased back and gently tugged at her underwear. Astrid kept her eyes on his face, lifting her hips as he pulled her last layer of protection down her thighs and off of her legs. She heard the garment fall softly to the floor. Cold air rushed where there was once just a wet heat.

He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her higher on the bed. Then he settled back over her, half kneeling and half lying against her. The places where her bare skin touched his burned.

She pulled his mouth down to meet hers when his fingers first brushed over the damp curls at her center. Just that light, exploratory touch had her moaning, and he muffled the noise with a kiss. He was as curious with her sex as he was with everything else. He traced her shape, learning her dips and curves. He tested her soft lips, pressed her open to trace the slippery evidence of her desire. When he stumbled upon the bundle of nerves that she knew from her own explorations made her cry out, she dug her nails into his shoulder and jerked.

His favorite part of discovering her body had to be her reactions. Because he used one hand to still her squirming hips and used the other to slowly rub the aching little nub. Her teeth bit his lip to keep back a loud plea. It only encouraged him, and his fingertips massaged harder, faster. Her muscles clenched and flexed in search of release from the inexplicable pleasure. It was awful. She wanted him to stop, but never stop. She wanted him to let her go, but never take his hands off her again.

Then his wonder got the best of him. Hiccup dared lower, swirling a single finger around her dripping entrance. He broke their kiss to inhale sharply, and something like a growl rumbled in his chest as he pressed inside.

Astrid whimpered his name. The simple invasion, the incredible fire stirring at the friction stirred against her inner muscles- it made her beg for more. She murmured her pleas into his neck, nibbling sloppy open-mouthed kisses across his skin.

Hiccup swore. His groin dug that hidden heat against her hip, and she was overcome with the terrible desire to touch it. To know it. Before she could stop her wandering hand, it slid between them and traced the outline of him as he strained against his pants. She was rewarded by the sharp shove of his finger burying inside of her. For a moment she wondered if she could get drunk by the taste of alcohol on his tongue alone.

She thought she might fall to pieces when his finger began a rhythm that he mimicked against her searching palm. Her body rolled against his, searching for more friction, more heat, simply more. He eased a second finger inside her, and it was suddenly difficult to bite back her helpless moans. She was pitching towards the edge of release, she knew, but she was incapable of holding on to the shreds of control she needed to survive. Every slam of her heart in her chest was accompanied by the imperative need to unravel.

Then Hiccup used his thumb to tease that swollen pearl, and she did.

Her jaw dropped as she shivered, crying a silent scream into the slope of his neck. Wave after wave of disorienting pleasure shook her, crashing down in a way that made it difficult to breathe. She was only half aware of her nails scratching at his bandages, his incoherent whispers in her hair. All she could do was gasp and be destroyed by the perfect blaze of completion.

His tortured groan was the first thing that came back to her when she could grasp at threads of thought again. Slowly withdrawing his fingers from between her thighs, he squeezed her waist and lost kisses in her hair. With the hand trapped between them, she worked at the knot of his pants and tugged at his waistband. Between the trembling after-shocks of her orgasm and the tight cut of the fabric, peeling his pants away from his hips felt as frustrating for her as her bindings must have been for him.

Then he twisted, changing angles, and she was able to slide her hand inside the constricted space. Her fingers closed around skin smoother than silk and hotter than the flames of the forge. Hiccup hissed, his hands digging into her flesh. She could feel reason slowly returning to her, and she tried to reconcile the girth of what she squeezed with the clench of muscles around his fingers. It was impossible. There was no way.

"You're... big," she breathed, eloquence stolen by her shattered arousal.

There was only a little humor in his sharp laugh. "Thank you?" His shaking hand slid up her arm, gently grasping her wrist, and then he was easing her down and up. He guided her into a rhythm similar to the one he'd pressed between her thighs.

Astrid swallowed hard, suddenly self conscious. She'd always known the mechanics of intercourse, how it worked in theory. But she'd also been mostly unconcerned, her only picture of the male sex organ being the half-glance she'd been subjected to when Snotlout pantsed Tuffnut right in front of her several months ago. What she'd seen then had been wholly unimpressive and not worth worrying about. The length she was stroking now, though- that was swollen and stiff and seemingly of a completely different species.

Perhaps that was what sparked the first tremor of nervousness.

Astrid let him teach her how he liked to be touched. He instructed her in shuddered moans and breathy whispers and in mumbled words she couldn't make out as he kissed them against her temple. It was an addicting kind of power, one she enjoyed wielding. She liked the way his hips surged up to meet her. She liked how he tore his pants lower so that her hand more freedom to move. She adored the feeling of his shoulders trembling as he suspended his weight above her, as he moved to kneel between her thighs.

"I love you," he gasped. "You're perfect. I love you."

Dread slammed into her like a hammer to the back, knocking the breath from her lungs. Her hand froze in shock, and he gently pulled it away. Then he was there. A breath from taking the thing women saved for their husband on their wedding night. You're Astrid, he always said, like that explained everything.

He's never known another woman. You might just be... convenient.

"No," she choked, tearing away from him before she knew what she was doing. His hands jerked away like he'd touched a fire, and she pulled

herself out from under his warm weight.

Hiccup sat up and stared at her with a look that bordered on incredulous. "Astrid," he said. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not ready," she blurted, pressing her back to the wall and drawing her knees to her chest. "I thought I was. I thought I could be like Ruffnut and not care, but I do. I can't- I can't. Not until I know- not until I'm sure."

"Hold on, hold on," he whispered, fixing his pants on his hips before reaching out a hand. He brushed the back of his knuckles across hers, an action that only served to remind her of his wildness. "It's okay. I don't- I rushed it. I'm sorry." When she didn't flinch at his touch, he drew closer and traced her cheekbones beneath her frantic stare. "We'll wait. After we talk to your chief tomorrow, we'll see about getting married. Okay?"

"Married?" she laughed, though there was no amusement in it. As if it was the fact that he wasn't her husband that bothered her. Confusion darkened his gaze as she shook her head. "I can't marry you tomorrow. Gods, I'm still engaged to somebody else."

His hand drew back, as if he'd been stung. She missed the way his features suddenly dropped.

"Why?" That one word was so loaded, but she was too distracted to notice.

"You don't get it, Hiccup." She raked her fingers through her bangs with frustration. "You think you get this stuff, that it can be fixed by just having a wedding, but it can't. It's not your fault either. You just don't know what it's like to be human, have human feelings." Her eyes slammed shut as the words slipped past her lips. "You're not human."_

And then she realized what she'd said. She gasped, attempting to backtrack.

"That's not true. You are. You're human, Hiccup, you just don't understand how relationships work. You can't know that you love me. You can't-"

She was cut off by the press of his palm against her mouth. When Astrid opened her eyes to look at him, there was a flash of something she'd never seen in his face before. Betrayal.

"You're still engaged to Snotlout?" he asked, his brow crumpled with something too hurt to be irritation. As if everything else she had said had just fallen aside. "You're still marrying him? After... You never told him?"

She shook her head. "It's not like that," she mumbled against his hand.

"No, don't do that." Anger lit his expression. "Don't write it off like some Viking thing I don't understand. Yes or no- have you told him you won't go through with the wedding?"

Yes. And no. And a thousand times and in not so many words.

But Hiccup didn't see all of the times she'd refused. The axe she'd swung into her fiance's face. The days she'd gotten her feet off of the ground and just _run. _All he saw was the second of hesitation in her eyes.

He let his hand fall from her mouth. The corners of his mouth turned upwards in a smile that held no mirth. Shaking his head, he pushed away from the bed.

"Hiccup, wait, you have to let me explain." She moved to stop him, but then froze. She'd been undressed for a while now. But she didn't feel _naked_ until that exact moment. Her fingers knotted in the bed furs. Drew them up to cover herself.

"No. I don't." He tied his pants with sharp movements, crossing the room to snatch his shirt from her desk. "If you could explain, I would have understood by now, right?"

She tried to reason with herself as he tugged the shredded remains of his shirt over his head. It was still stained with blood, and she could make out the white of his bandages beneath the slashes his dragon brother had left. She tried to tell herself that it was okay if he left, so long as he was back in the morning to face the village with her. She deserved to sleep alone, for everything she'd done and said. It was fair for him to leave her like this.

"Will you be there tomorrow?" she whispered, afraid to ask.

He stilled, not looking at her, and then went to the window. "You know so much about relationships," he answered. She wasn't sure if the hurt in his voice overpowered the bitter cold. "You tell me."

And then before she could dare to ask again, he was gone.

20. Chapter 20

****Chapter Twenty.****

She stirred several times before her body finally woke, jerked awake by blood-curdling snarls and sharp claws slicing behind her eyelids. Every time her eyes snapped open, they searched for a staff leaning against the wall or a shock of dark hair against her pillow. They were never there. By the time something like energy crawled into her muscles, the sun was coming through her window at an odd angle. She'd slept late. She was surprised nobody roused her.

Astrid sat up, finding her wrist tangled in her breast bindings. She'd never thought to look for them after Hiccup left, though she did pull her nightgown back on with rough, trembling hands. Scowling, she tried to fix the knot of linen strips and free her arm, discovering that she had to unroll the entire mess. She exhaled a frustrated sigh. Running her fingers through her bangs, she let her head fall into her palms.

Her skin felt too tight for her body. Like the laces of a dress pulled too taut. On the other hand, her insides felt scrubbed raw. Everything in her chest ached. All the pieces had been torn out,

shattered, and then shoved back in. All the jagged edges poked and prodded uncomfortably.

She wasn't one to spend mornings lazing in bed. Usually she was up with the sun, dressing for training and facing the day with her chin up. She couldn't manage it, though. Downstairs, she could hear her mother clattering and cleaning. Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine herself as a little girl again. So she could run down the stairs and slam into her mother's hug. Odd enough, as bad as things had been between them lately, when things were at their worst, she wanted that maternal embrace.

She procrastinated. And delayed. She took deep breaths to try and clear her head as she came to terms with what she had to do.

She just didn't think she'd have to do it alone.

"Mom?" she asked from the bottom of the stairs, once she'd forced herself into clean clothes and fixed her hair into a simple braid.

The older woman stood in the main room, sorting a pile of clothing to be mended. She glanced up for just a second at the sound of Astrid's voice, half-folding a pair of leggings against her chest. "I was beginning ta wonder if yeh'd been eaten last night," she commented, her tone flat. Her blonde curls were attempting to come loose, and for the first time Astrid noticed how tired she looked.

She flexed her fingers at her sides, nervous. "Can we sit for a minute? I need to talk to you."

Her mother went still. Her gaze flicked from the mending to her daughter. Slowly lowering the leggings to the table, she stared warily and pulled out a chair to lower herself in. "Yeh could do without that dreadful tone."

Astrid crossed the room, every step feeling like her boots were weighted with metal. Brushing her fingertips along the back of the chair across from the other woman, she pulled it out with an apprehensive exhale, and then sat.

And then she found herself at a loss for words. Her thoughts scattered, drifting to and fro as she tried to decide on the most prudent way to approach the necessary conversation. She wanted to tell her mother about Hiccup. About Snotlout. About the chief and how much trouble she was in. There was so much that she wasn't sure where to begin. Or if- now that she'd hurt him so deeply- there was any point in discussing Hiccup.

The first thing she ended up blurting was, "I'm in love."

The confession was obviously not something her mother was expecting. Her eyes went wide, blinking at Astrid as she searched for a reply. The younger blonde glanced down at her lap with a wince, wishing she'd thought of a better way to begin their conversation.

"When you signed the contract with the Jorgensons, you were right," she continued, hoping to cover up her awkward approach with some tact. She wrung her hands uncomfortably in her lap. "There wasn't anyone else I was interested in. Things were different. _I _was

different."

"Is it Snotlout?" Her mother breathed, though her expression said that she already knew the answer.

Astrid shook her head. "It's someone else. Someone special." Though she tried out a smile, it twisted and died on her lips. "I don't know if he loves me the way I love him. But he's- he's incredible. Brave. And compassionate. And kind. And I've changed the way I think because of him."

She took a deep breath.

"I did something." She forced her gaze up to meet her mother's. "Something I'm going to be in a lot of trouble for."

"If it's- if it's that," the Viking woman began. "Snotlout doesn't have ta know. The wedding is coming up in a couple of weeks. After yer safely wedded, no one will be able to make any accusations." She frowned. "It'll all be rumor."

Astrid rolled her eyes, pushing back from the table and standing. She was too anxious to sit, too afraid of the emotions rattling through her head and chest and throat to be still. "Is going behind Snotlout's back the worst thing I could do?" she growled, putting her palm to her forehead and pacing away. She turned back and willed her mother to understand. "What I've done is worse, mom. Or at least it'll seem like it after you find out."

"Are yeh not planning on telling me?" Her voice became a little sharp, then. She sat straighter and adopted the displeased look that Astrid was so used to receiving lately.

"I can't," she answered tersely. "I don't know what you'll do. But it affects the entire village. And I could be- I could be exiled, or worse for it."

Her mother was standing now. So much for having a calm, seated discussion. "For the love of Freya, girl, tell me what it is!"

"I can't," Astrid repeated, her forehead creasing with stress. "You'll find out soon enough. Probably today. I'm going to the chief to confess as soon as I leave." She dropped her voice low and stared apologetically. "But people are going to talk, mom. I needed to tell you first so that you'll be ready for it."

"How can I be?" she hissed. "Yeh won't tell me what it is I need ta be prepared for!"

"You can tell them you never suspected," Astrid continued, ignoring her. "Tell them I'm an awful daughter and a traitor, if you want. I'll understand." Swallowing hard, she traced the skull studs at the waistband of her skirt with restless fingertips. "I just hope- when everything is said and done- I hope you won't treat me like Uncle Finn."

Her mother tried to interrupt. Astrid cut her off.

"I hope you don't throw me out, though I'll be okay if you do. I hope you know that it wasn't a mistake, what I've done. That you know that

I really believe that it was the right thing to do, and that I had the village's best interests at heart." Her throat felt tight. "I hope you still love me, even if everyone else hates me."

The older woman's expression dropped. She looked tired again, worn and haggard. "Yeh could never make yer father and I hate yeh," she sighed. Her hand went to her hair and tugged in a habit that Astrid recognized as one of her own. "A mother doesn't abandon her children."

"There's one more thing." Astrid tried to resist the urge to stop herself there. To fold herself into her mother's arms for what might be the last time and forget the words about to tumble from her lips. "I'm not going to marry Snotlout. Not next week, not ever."

The ire rose instantly, pinkening her mother's cheeks. "We don't have a _choice_, Astrid!"

"You _don't_!" she agreed, and then stabbed her index finger towards her own chest. "Because it's _my_ choice to make. And I choose _no_!"

"We are _indebted_-"

"I'm going to pay it off," she assured her. Lifting her chin a fraction, she tried not to clench her jaw. "I'm going to tell Spitelout that I'm the one who owes him. And I'm going to find jobs on or off Berk until I can pay him back, even if I don't finish until I'm old and gray, but I'm _not_ going to marry somebody I don't love."

"And yeh think this person you're in love with will marry yeh? Take on yer debt and stand by yeh when the village turns? I raised yeh ta be smarter than that, Astrid. Yer being foolish!"

"I'm _not_." She clenched her hands into fists. "I don't know that I'll _ever_ get married, but when I do, it'll be on my terms. I promise you that."

Her mother took a few steps forward to close the distance between them, but Astrid sidestepped away, towards the front door. The sting of the slap against her cheek was still too warm.

"Come here," the Viking woman growled.

"Find Dad," Astrid countered. She eased toward the exit without taking her eyes off of her mother. "Find Dad and tell him what to expect, okay?"

"_Astrid_!"

"Tell Dad." She wrenched the door open. "I love you." And then before anything more could be said, she ducked out into the village and ran from her house before she could be followed.

Nothing felt quite right. There was a silence resting over the rooftops that unnerved her and made her feel like an animal being hunted through the woods. Astrid's breaths sounded too loud, her footfalls deafening against the earth as she darted through the streets and behind homes. None of the usual villagers were out and

about to watch her run by, nor did she hear the usual shouting of men reconstructing the damage from the raid. The whole thing was eerie and discomfoting.

"Please be there," she whispered as she whipped through the forest. Her axe smacked against her spine with every step. The wind was cold against her cheeks, biting at her nose and ears. "_Please_ be there."

She tripped through the cave leading to the cove's entrance. Her hand scraped against the wall as she grasped it for support, and she flinched at the rough burn. Adjusting her feet beneath her, she pushed away from the slick black stone and half-jogged to the mouth of the cave. The picturesque clearing stretched out beneath her, the lake's waters lapping with the light breeze. There wasn't a Night Fury in sight. Or a dragon-riding wild man.

Astrid fell to her knees, out of breath. She let her arms drop limply to her sides as she scanned the cove. Hiccup's home for the last few months. It looked untouched, as if he'd never spent a moment there. As if she hadn't first touched a dragon without the intent of hurting it there. As if her life hadn't changed there.

She spent a long time knelt at the cove's entrance, willing him with every heartbeat to appear. The image of the hurt in his eyes the night before wouldn't fade, and every breath reminded her that she'd ruined things with her only ally. The only one who could save Berk. Maybe she'd doomed them all.

When she could, she stood and crawled down the rock face. Hiccup kept his things in the tree beyond the lake, wrapped in an oiled cloth out of sight and out of reach. If that little bundle was still there, maybe there was still hope. But even after crawling through every branch and tearing a hole in her leggings nearly falling to her death, Astrid came to the conclusion that the boy she'd fallen in love with was gone for good. He'd taken his things with him when he'd left.

She didn't allow the burning of her eyes to turn into tears. She wouldn't. Lowering herself down to ground level, she wiped the bark from her hands off on her shirt and reattached her axe to her back.

It changed nothing for her. It didn't change the fact that she ached for him like she was holding her breath. It didn't change the fact that she would go to the chief, with or without him. And it didn't change the fact that she wouldn't be marrying into the Jorgenson family.

It struck her that she probably owed it to Snotlout to break the news to him first. It was a given that her blow to the side of his face was no small indicator of her reluctance, but if there was doubt in her parents' minds, there was likely some for him too. Astrid sighed and rubbed the heels of her palms into her eyes. Then she started back towards the village.

Her journey back was much less rushed. Now that she knew Hiccup was gone, she was much less inclined to make her confession. She knew she'd hurt him. But a part of her had held onto the hope that he'd still go with her, if only to discover his father's identity. That

was gone now. She would have to steel herself to face the consequences of her actions alone.

Crunching through piles of dead straw and leaves, she packed all of her feelings into a little ball and then hid it deep in her chest. She'd have to put them somewhere no one could reach, have to be untouchable. She'd have to be the Astrid of three months past. Cold, angry, and strong.

If only she felt anything like the girl she was before Hiccup and Toothless crashed into her life.

The morning was drawing late when she finally stalked back into the village and set out for the Jorgensons'. It was unlikely that she'd find them there, but she tried knocking at their door anyways. When, as she expected, nobody answered, she sighed. Then she turned and started for the docks, where the village had taken the worst of last night's raid.

She didn't get far. The sound of running behind her had her reaching for her axe and turning on her heel. She spun and struck a defensive stance, but then relaxed when she saw the twins running towards her.

"Astrid!" they called, panic in their expressions.

The girl let her axe fall to her side. She assumed they were concerned, since she'd disappeared from the chaos without a word to either of them the night before. "Hey, guys," she greeted as they approached, feeling a familiar frown set on her mouth. It felt odd on her lips after spending so much time smiling with Hiccup. "Have you seen Snot? I have to talk to him."

The two were out of breath when they finally pulled to a stop. Tuff leaned over and put his hands to his knees as he gasped for air. His twin nodded and grabbed Astrid's elbow.

"You have to stop him. He's going to the ring!" Ruffnut blurted.

Her brother elbowed her out of the way. "He won't listen. Not to us." Tuffnut stared at Astrid with pleading eyes as he held Ruff back at an arm's length. "He's going to kill the dragons. All of them."

Astrid's stomach lurched. Her heart slammed into her ribcage as she sucked in a shocked breath.

"The chief," she choked out. Then she was running again.

She sprinted for his house first, just as she had with the Jorgensons. And just like then, her rapid pounding at his door was answered with silence. Shrieking a wordless growl of frustration, she tore back down the stairs and blew past the twins as they tried to race after her.

Though she paused at the forge as she passed it, there was only one figure working at the coals. Gobber just barely met her terrified gaze before she flew. Then she stopped herself, using the door frame to pull herself back inside.

"Stoick-" she demanded, her brow furrowed deep and distraught.
"Stoick- where's the chief?"

"He was at the Great Hall last I saw him," Gobber answered, setting his hammer down and taking a step towards her. It was for naught- she was gone before his peg leg hit the floorboards.

A fiery blaze was beginning in the pit of her stomach. That was good. Anger gave her something to feed off of, a cause to keep her legs moving and her lungs from collapsing. Her nails dug into her palms as her arms pumped at her sides, and she grit her teeth against the sharp stitch developing in her ribs. The studs in her axe-head bruised her spine with every jostle.

How dare he, she seethed as she ran. In the back of her mind, she had the thought that if she let those dragons be killed, Hiccup would never forgive her.

The many steps of the Great Hall felt like climbing a mountain, making her thighs burn and her calves cramp. She threw open the heavy doors with a groan of strain and then burst into the hall. A fire burned low in the hearth. The thuds of her boots echoed off of the tall walls, interrupting the low conversation held by the council in the center of the room.

"Chief!" she called, rushing to where Stoick the Vast sat at the head of the table. Pressing a palm to the ache in her side, she looked down at his bearded scowl imploringly. "Snotlout's going to kill the dragons. You have to stop him."

A low mutter circled the table as the Vikings sat back in their chairs and glared at the blonde. The way they whispered to each other and looked at her with such disdain- she instantly knew something was amiss. When the chief stood, towering over her and pressing the knuckles of his fist into the tabletop, dread corked the airflow to her lungs.

"I gave him the order," Stoick spat. His voice was deep and dangerous. "He told us what you've been doing, Astrid. We know."

The twins ran into the hall just as the chief's hand clenched painfully around her upper arm. Astrid cried out at the bruising grip and tried to scramble backwards reflexively. Through her wince, she could make out the black fury in his eyes, the barely restrained hostility. She resisted the urge to fall to the floor beneath its scalding ice.

"Please, Stoick, you have to listen to me," she begged, paralyzed as she became aware of the sudden threat in his hold. "The dragons aren't what you think. They can be tamed. Trained." Swallowing the knot in her throat, she shook her head and tugged uselessly at her arm. "If you kill them, I can't prove it to you. You have to let me go!"

"You mean if we kill them, you can't turn them on us!" he hissed, giving her a shake. She yelped and cringed. "You were the last person I would suspect! And you've betrayed your own people!"

"No!" she insisted.

"You've thrown your lot in with them!" he roared. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Please," she whispered. Astrid tried to peel away his fingers with her own, but there was no give in his grip. A thought squeezed through the panic. "You once told me we don't get to choose our fates," she tried. "You can. Right now. _Please_, Stoick!"

He bared his teeth at her, and suddenly the resemblance between him and his son was uncanny. "Don't use my words against me, you witch."

"Choose a different fate," she pleaded. "Choose peace." She thought of Stormfly, of Snotlout's axe falling on her throat. She thought of Barf and Belch, dead less than a day after receiving their new names. And then she reached for the lowest blow she could manage. "Choose what Valka would have chosen."

The room went quiet. The table fell silent, and the chief blinked at her with wide eyes. Pain sliced through a green gaze so much like Hiccup's that it almost took her back to the exact moment she'd realized she'd broken his heart. His grip loosened just slightly.

It was only a second. Only a half breath of shock. But it was all she needed to shove her heel into his kneecap and twist her arm free.

Stoick stumbled from the kick. Other Vikings stood from their spots with outraged cries. Astrid turned her back on all of it and ran.

"Buy me some time!" she shouted to the twins as she escaped, sending a prayer to Thor that they wouldn't face the kind of punishment she surely would when they caught her. She could take it. She just had to free the dragons first.

As she flew from the Great Hall, she noticed Gobber ascending the stairs, his bushy brows lifted high with confusion and surprise. "Stoick's gone mad!" she called over her shoulder as she blew past him. "Talk some sense into him!"

Was he mad? Oh, spitting. But by the time Gobber realized why, he would have given her a few minutes longer.

Astrid's arm throbbed, her fingertips tingling as blood began flowing through her veins again. She made fists to distract her from the sensation and forced herself to move faster. She wheezed for air, feeling her body protest. Her legs were weak with trembling adrenaline, the fear from her encounter trying to leave her stunned. But still, she pushed on.

She hit the bridge overlooking the kill ring, throwing herself against the grate.

"Snotlout!" she screamed, seeing the Viking's horned helmet and blue scales. Her fingers wrapped around the wire for a brief second. "Snotlout, don't hurt her!"

Below, the young man glared at the confused, hissing Nadder and skillfully spun the axe in his hand. He didn't look up at the sound

of Astrid's cry, but the way his expression set, she knew he had heard her. Instead of trying to protest again, she tore away and shot for the entrance. He left the gate closed, so the dragon couldn't escape. Astrid pulled the lever as hard as she could, gritting her teeth with the effort. Then she exploded into the arena and threw herself between the two.

"Don't you touch her!" she shouted, holding her hands out at her sides in a pathetic attempt at guarding her Nadder. "You're not going to do this!"

Snotlout shifted his weight, his jaw clenched. "Get out of the way, Astrid. I already talked to the chief."

"So did I," she growled. "I don't care what he says, you're not killing these dragons." She felt the soft nudge of Stormfly's nose at her back, heard her trill happily. Astrid had to resist the urge to smile back at her, to give her the reassurance she wanted. If she broke the stare she had pinned on Snotlout, she wasn't sure what he'd do.

"This is for your own good," Snot shot back. His hand moved higher up the axe's handle. "If it weren't for me, the elders would have you killed!"

"If it wasn't for you, the elders wouldn't know." She stepped forward, ignoring the way he lifted his weapon as if in threat. Her chest heaved, still tight with the strain of her labored breaths. "Give me a chance to show you. The dragons are good."

Snotlout shook his head. "Don't be stupid, Astrid! They're the enemy! Not me! They're the ones who burn down the village every month!"

"Because they have to," she pressed. She urged him to listen, to understand. "There's a queen, Snot. It's enormous, the biggest thing I've ever seen. And she controls them. She makes them attack us!"

"You're not going to talk me out of this." Stalking forward, he lifted his axe in preparation to send it flying. "I'm going to keep you safe, no matter what."

"I don't need your help!" she shrieked, panicking at the sight of the blade flashing. "Put it down!"

"I'm sorry, Astrid." He scowled. "Get out of the way." His body tensed, recoiling as he drew his arm back and aimed.

"Stormfly, go!" Her braid whipped against her cheek as she turned to scream at the Nadder, gesturing towards the exit. She flew forward to stop Snotlout, but she was sloppy. He shoved her to the stone floor and sent the axe spinning.

It all happened in a blur. Stormfly was distracted by her rider's distress, but she caught sight of the projectile just in time to slash it away. She spun, and Astrid recognized the attack pattern. With a cry of protest, the girl pushed herself to her feet and grabbed Snotlout by the shirt. Astrid managed to pull him out of the line of the whistling poison darts, but she wasn't quite fast

enough.

Her jaw dropped in silent, choking pain. Her left arm went limp, fingers uncurling from the Viking's shirt and falling aside.

"Astrid?" Snot's voice suddenly changed, concern replacing the cold fire he'd been accusing her with. All she could see was the pale skin of his throat, and his adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "Astrid- _shit_- are you okay?"

She exhaled sharply, sweat dribbling down her temple. Closing her eyes for just a second, she tried to pinpoint the exact place in her back where the poison dart had embedded its tip. Just above her shoulder blade maybe? She wasn't sure. As long as it wasn't the ribs. Anything but the ribs. But it can't be the ribs, she thought to herself with a little bit of hysteria. Anything piercing her heart would be much worse than this.

Astrid felt Snotlout's arm reach around her waist, but she didn't realize for a few moments that it was because her knees were giving out beneath her. Blinking with surprise, she tried to move her left hand but was met with a stabbing sensation that made her whimper.

One thought came to her mind as her legs crumpled and Snotlout followed her to their knees.

"Don't you dare blame this on her," she commanded him, looking up and meeting his terrified eyes with a glower. "When the chief comes-" She winced. "Don't you tell him this was her fault."

"I'm sorry," he blurted, his gaze searching her face. "Gods, I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to- Dammit- Why did you-"

There was a sudden noise that Astrid couldn't quite place at first. At first she thought it was Stormfly, but her nervous, confused chittering sounded apart from the strange snarl that wasn't quite dragon-esque. Then Snotlout was torn away from her, and she fell onto her forearm.

Her tongue was starting to thicken. She'd always thought poison would _slow_ her blood, make it sluggish, but she could already feel it racing through her veins. It made her pulse speed in a way that wasn't entirely adrenaline. The sudden jostling set the world tilting, and she squinted up with perplexed dizziness.

"_Never_ put your hands on her!" Hiccup's voice thundered, echoing off of the walls of the arena with a vicious ricochet. She exhaled sharply as she tried to make out his face, but he was crouched in an aggressive stance in front of her, blocking Snotlout from her view.

Something like relief rushed faster than the toxins through her system.

"Who do you think you are?!" she heard Snotlout snap, and she tried to push herself up to make herself part of the conversation. To stop the argument before things escalated. But her muscles trembled. She fell to her side, and her head hit the stone.

"Her-" Hiccup's voice suddenly cut off with a low growl. "Hers." Astrid's vision swirled again, and her stomach churned with nausea. "Toothless- hold him there."

Then he was crawling towards her, drawing her into his lap with excruciating gentleness. His staff clattered as it fell from his hands. His brow broke with dismay. "Astrid," he whispered, and the sight of his face made her smile despite the way her heart was suddenly squeezing with every pulse.

Her own breaths sounded quick and shallow to her ears. "I'm sorry," she told him, the first words she could summon to her lips. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Hiccup, I'm sorry."

He leaned over and pulled her to his chest, making a chuffing noise against her hair. "It's okay. I'm here. You're gonna be okay."

So he said. But Astrid knew better. She'd seen how quick Nadder poison worked, seen it kill grown men in a matter of hours. There was a metallic taste in her dry mouth, and cold chills shook her bones like autumn had finally decided to turn to winter. Her vision was fogging around the edges, and when he pulled back, she couldn't make out anything beyond the halo of his face. It was all she wanted to see anyways.

"I told my mom," she whispered, the fingers of her good arm digging weakly into his furs. She had to let him know before she lost the chance to. "I told- I told her I wouldn't marry him." Her voice sounded startlingly strange.

Snotlout was shouting something, but he was just a garbled background noise.

"It's okay," Hiccup assured her, his eyes an impossible green. His thumbs brushed at her cheeks and he touched his forehead to hers. "I overreacted. I know Vikings are different."

"No," she slurred. "I was wrong. I should have-" Her back suddenly arched into him, her body trying to twist away from the poison bleeding from her shoulder. Her shirt felt wet and sticky for some reason, and her addled brain couldn't understand why. When the sudden wave of crippling pain passed, she was left breathless and tired. She blinked. Her eyes had difficulty focusing on his face again. "I told her... told her I love you. I do. I love you."

Astrid couldn't be sure, but she thought his features collapsed. She felt something pushing her bangs away from her forehead. He spoke, but his words were becoming as muffled as Snotlout's. She ignored the fist tightening around her racing heart and furrowed her brow at him.

"Do... them... me?" He tried again, but his voice was fading in and out. The fog around the corners of her vision was blackening, narrowing on his mouth. "Them... me? Astrid... Them... me..."

"You," she mumbled, choking on something wet in her throat. She thought she shook her head, but everything was trapped between numbness and pain so she couldn't be sure. It could have been the shifting dizziness instead. "You. You."

His face blurred, and she whimpered. Not from the discomfort of dying, but because she couldn't see his eyes anymore.

And then the world went black.

21. Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty-one.

The first time Astrid awoke was to respond to the suddenly violent twisting of her stomach. She wasn't aware of where she was or what was happening- all she knew was the sharp, nauseous lurch and bile in the back of her throat.

"Good girl," a voice murmured nearby. Hands pushed sweaty hair away from her face as her eyes watered and her body heaved with painful retching. Her torso felt like it was being torn in half. Like she was being split open and sliced straight down her middle. Sobbing and gasping, she laid back into the softness that should have brought her comfort.

Wherever she was, it was dim. Her head spun too much for her eyes to focus on the flickering shadows and swirling details. Everything was pain, fire, aching. Breath labored, she listened to the wheeze of her own lungs and let it send her back to sleep.

In the distance, someone whispered, "You're okay. You're safe. I'm here."

She almost dreamed. There were morphing colors and distorted sounds, things that wanted to take shape and permeate her dark subconscious. Every now and then she'd see the flash of a blade or hear a vicious roar. Talons tore across the walls of her mind. Then fingertips would brush away the claw marks left behind. She could just barely feel warm lips against her temples. Snatches of conversation wove in and out of audibility like the tangled laces of her nicest dress.

And when she woke for the second time, she knew it was hours later. The atmosphere was a little different, and the sharp knives of pain had diminished to a stiff and dreary soreness.

Shifting orange light sizzled through her lashes as they parted. Astrid blinked, not entirely awake. There was a heaviness in her limbs that kept her still, an exhaustion that soaked through her muscles. She barely had the energy to open her eyes and drag them across the stone ceiling above her.

The bed of furs where she was lying was tucked into what seemed to be a natural little alcove in a cave wall. The furs weren't neatly sewn off like the ones at home, but they had rough, unfinished edges. They were wrapped carefully around her, drawn up to her collarbone. Her arms had been left free, and while she couldn't seem to locate the control for her left hand, her right fingers twitched inside a restricting warmth.

Her gaze slid to her right. Hiccup leaned against the edge of the strange niche, his head cushioned by his arm. His eyes were closed, his chest slowly rising and falling, and his fingers were tangled in

hers by her side. Fire light danced across his features.

Toothless rested nearby. She could hear his own rumbling breaths. When she searched him out, she found his black shape standing out from the shadows in the corner. Florescent green eyes met hers, and he lifted his head from his paws to look at her. He made a curious little hum.

Soothed, Astrid's eyelids fell once more. This time her dreams were solid and sweet.

* * *

><p>"No scorching sun nor freezing cold... could stop me on my journey..."<p>

A faint, fragmented song broke into her consciousness, sung in a low and off-tune whisper near her ear. Hiccup's voice was decidedly not meant for serenading, but it was perfect for drawing her up and out of the haze of pain and sleepy images.

"If you will promise me your heart... and love me for eternity..."

Astrid stirred, feeling an arm slung across her waist. It grounded her into her body, making her aware of her position. She was buried in the bed of furs she remembered, curled up on her right side and folded gently against a warm, bandaged chest. Testing her left side, she dragged weak fingertips along the strips of fabric. It would seem she was regaining function, slowly.

She exhaled into his collarbone. Then she drew a breath and mumbled, "What song is that?"

Hiccup stiffened, his hand fisting in the furs at her back. Then he released a long and heavy sigh, nuzzling his nose in her hair. "A lullaby my mom used to sing," he answered, kissing back her bangs. "I don't remember all the words."

Astrid tried to roll to her back, to lean away so she could see him, but her muscles protested sharply. She cringed and swallowed thickly. Her tongue felt drier than dust, scraping against the inside of her mouth in its search for moisture. She could hear dripping water somewhere, and her parched throat craved a drop.

"Careful," he told her, following his warning with a series of dragon-esque noises that she wondered if he meant to speak in Norse. Peeling away a layer of furs, his fingers skittered up her spine, making her realize that her shirt had been removed. He tugged at something digging into her shoulder. "I don't think it'll open up again. But let's not take chances."

She noticed that his bandages were wrapped differently than she had tied them- when had that been? Last night? Two nights ago? How long had she been asleep? They were sloppier, if possible, and she could just barely fit her fingertips beneath some of the loops. "What about yours?"

"It's fine. The stitches were bugging me. I took 'em out."

Astrid made a tired noise of disapproval. "They were helping you heal."

"Night Fury saliva works better," he countered. Then he shifted, pushing up on his elbow and pressing his forehead against hers so he could look in her face. Even in the dim light, she could make out the dark bruises under his eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Sore," she answered, drinking in his face. "Thirsty."

His reply was a bobbing nod. He carefully untangled their legs and pulled away, easing out of the alcove before crawling out of the light of the fire and disappearing into the dark. It seemed that the lupine grace that had slowly faded during his time on Berk was returning. He loped on his hands and the balls of his feet again, where he'd been beginning to walk upright most of the time.

Wherever he ducked away to, it couldn't be far, because she could hear him bumbling and moving objects around. With her senses sharpening every moment, she could also detect the faint sound of rushing water and faint chattering noises.

"Where am I?" she asked the moment he returned, shallow bowl in hand. At first she had thought perhaps her strange haven was somewhere deep in the cove, or maybe in the mountains of Berk. The sounds didn't quite add up, though, and she'd explored most of Berk as a child. This place was decidedly unfamiliar.

"My nest." Hiccup set the bowl aside for a minute to gently ease her into a sitting position. She grunted against the twinge in her shoulder, but it wasn't completely unbearable. Then he was easing behind her and leaning her back against his chest. She was pleased to note that while he had removed her shirt and breast bindings, there was a bandage covering her breasts and left shoulder.

"Your nest?" she echoed, shock in her tone. Though she was about to say more, she was interrupted by the press of cold ceramic at her lips. Her fingers curled around Hiccup's wrist, steadying his hand, and she gratefully sipped at the cool water. It was crisp and chilly and impossibly clean-tasting. She drank so quickly that she almost inhaled a swallow- sending her choking and flinching and coughing. Before Hiccup could stop her and ask her if she was alright, she was searching for more and gulping at it despite the burn in her throat. Drops dribbled past the corners of her mouth and trickled down her neck. She didn't release his wrist until the bowl was empty.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Tried to get you to drink some while you were sleeping. Wasn't easy."

Shaking her head against his apology, she wiped the back of her hand against her wet chin. "Your nest- why am I here?"

"I brought you here." His voice rang with a little confusion. "I asked you if you wanted me to leave you with them. You said no."

Astrid didn't recall that. Then again, she'd been so woozy from the poison coursing through her system, she found the entire scene a little foggy. All she remembered- all that was important- was that

he'd come back. He'd arrived exactly when she'd needed him.

"How am I alive?" she wondered then. She leaned her head back against his shoulder until she could see his face.

Hiccup swiped a droplet off of her throat with the pad of his thumb. "We've lived with dragons for almost twenty years. We'd be in rough shape if we didn't learn how to make anti-venoms and whatnot."

The use of his plural pronouns made her stiffen against him. A strange nervousness curled in her chest. "Is your mom here?"

"Mm-mm." His braid brushed her temple as he shook his head. "I checked. Off on a rescue or something."

Well, that soothed her unease a little bit. The disorientation of waking up without knowing when or where she was stressed her out slightly, but the thought of Valka being the one to undress her and nurse her back to health would have made her completely unravel. "I guess you don't know when she'll be back?"

"Nope."

"Lovely."

Feeling his steady breathing behind her was peaceful. His heart beat through both of their bandages and into her back. It shouldn't have been as comforting as it was, but before long, the gentle rise and fall of his chest began to turn into waves that rocked her back and forth. She was pulled beneath the tide again, and her fingers found his hair as her eyes closed.

She slept a lot. So much that she wasn't sure when the days changed. Time blurred in a series of dreams and bowlfuls of water and half-cooked fish that Hiccup fed her with his fingers. They exchanged pieces of conversation when she was awake, sometimes questions about the state of things on Berk, the likelihood that they'd been followed. Sometimes they didn't talk at all, letting their hands slide against each other, barely touching as their skin picked up bolts of faint friction. Occasionally he kissed her awake. Rarer, he was roused by her lips against his throat. For once, she didn't have to leave him, and he didn't have to leave her. They were able to trade childhood stories and terrible jokes (mostly supplied by Astrid) and relive painful memories with each other.

For example, the subject of her missing shirt inspired the retelling of the first time her mother had sat her down and discussed womanhood with her. It'd been shortly after her first cycle, and she'd gripped the kitchen chair with white knuckles and red cheeks and tried not to die of embarrassment. She didn't want to know just how Snot, Legs, and Tuff were different from her and Ruff. She didn't want to know about the mysteries of the male organ and how it operated and how one day she'd have a husband that she'd have to let shove his organ between her legs. That weird and secret place that she was just beginning to realize came with maintenance instructions. And the fact that he would plant seeds in her womb? Gods, that thought terrified her as a girl.

Those confessions made Hiccup laugh so hard she had to lean away from him, because he was jostling her injury. He explained his own experience on the topic. How his mother had caught him staring at a pair of mating dragons at an age so young he hardly remembered it. How she pointed out the differences in the male and female and how they fit together. Then with a matter-of-fact tone, she'd explained that Hiccup would find a human he wanted to mate with one day, and that was that. His curiosity was satiated, and it never became an issue until he was thirteen or fourteen and suddenly his body became treasonous. The story he shared with her about the first time he touched himself made her blush and bite back giggles.

It was easy. It was safe. There was no one around to discourage their behavior, their indecent discussions. Occasionally Toothless would wander in and nudge at Hiccup until the young man took him flying. But while they were undisturbed, they were completely at ease with each other. It was the longest opportunity they'd had to spend together since they met. When she was tired, she slept. When she was hungry, he fed her. And when she had to relieve herself, he helped her to the chamber pot and- to her extreme gratefulness- left to check on "everybody". Anything she wanted, he provided. Anything she couldn't do for herself, he accomplished.

On what Hiccup said was the third day, she told him she needed a bath.

It was past due. Laugurdagur would have been two days past, and she was covered in blood, sweat, some mystery concoction slathered onto her shoulder, and more Night Fury spit than she wanted to think about. Her hair felt grimy and smelled stale. Her face was almost too gross to allow him to kiss. She needed to feel clean again.

His lips twitched in a way that told her he wasn't one hundred percent interested in the idea, but despite whatever his reservations may have been, he nodded.

She was still far too weak to walk on her own. It made her feel annoyed and helpless, but as long as Hiccup was the only one to see her in that condition, she could live with it. He pushed back the furs of what she learned was his bed and helped her to her feet. Then he wrapped his arm around her waist and let her lean into him as they shuffled out.

The cave-like room she'd spent her recovery in narrowed into a long hallway, then opened again into a large, open space. There was another fire crackling in the center, an oven-like contraption pushed against the wall. Baskets were tucked into the corners, and rough, bench-like seating had been placed around the fire pit. Hiccup's gear was shucked by a separate tunnel- where it led, she had no idea. But this space wasn't enclosed. Large gaps in the stone looked out into the dark of night, and through it she could hear the loud clicking and squawking of dragons and the louder sound of rushing water.

For the first time, it struck Astrid that this was Hiccup's home. That he grew up with his mother around that fire. She blinked for a moment, taking it all in. It was sparse, maybe even bare, but there were hints of a human life. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but this little picture of domesticity wasn't it.

Her gaze fell on a small pair of scissors and a knife that rested on

a flattish boulder. It seemed to act as their table. "Bring those," she murmured to him, and he obeyed without argument. He left her to lean against the stone wall, tucking the items into his waistband, and then gathered a few more odds and ends before taking his place at her side once more.

"The rocks are steep here," he cautioned her as they stepped out into the open air. The light that filtered down from the sky was odd- the moonlight seemed milky and dispersed. Using his throat in a way she could only hope to mimic, Hiccup made an odd chirping noise.

She knew he was calling a dragon. Her common sense, if not the sound of beating wings, told her that. What she wasn't expecting, however, was to see the familiar face of her Nadder soaring forward to meet her.

Astrid gasped. "Stormfly!" Slowly moving across mossy rocks, she nearly dragged Hiccup along in her efforts to get close to the dragon. "You're okay!"

He chuckled. The Nadder trilled happily and nuzzled her horn into Astrid's belly.

She forced her weak left arm to rise and scratch at Stormfly's warm scales. Her dragon purred and clicked with satisfaction, then blinked up at the girl with sad, woeful eyes. She nudged at Astrid's shoulder.

"What, this?" she jerked her chin at the wound. "This is nothing. Wait until I show you my thigh."

After another few moments of reconciliation, Hiccup carefully lifted Astrid onto the Nadder's back and then climbed on behind her. She'd never ridden Stormfly with Hiccup, and it was a little strange. Also nice. With another dragon noise, he commanded the Nadder into flight, and her dragon glided down from the rocks with prompt obedience. She thought that they were going to fly farther, but he only guided Stormfly down the steep cliff-side and into the dark valley.

As her eyes adjusted, she found the source of the rushing water- a giant waterfall that poured into a crystal clear lake. Even in the dim, odd moonlight, she could make out small dragons swimming just beneath the surface.

"Wow," she breathed, tracing the source of the water up. That was when she realized the reason for the strange distortion of the evening light: the sanctuary didn't open to the sky. It was enclosed in what looked like a giant, iced dome. It made no sense, especially considering the almost balmy temperature of the lush green environment. But that was where the water was coming from- it was run off from the enormous icy roof. "This is... incredible," Hiccup.

He chuckled, helping her off of the Nadder's back. She leaned heavily on him as he escorted her to the lake's edge. Then he sat her down. "His Majesty will be happy to hear that."

"His Majesty?" Astrid blinked up at him, confused.

Hiccup grinned mischievously. Then he nodded behind her.

She expected to see someone standing in the lake, perhaps wearing a crown. But there was nothing there. Just a few hatchlings curled up on a hill of snow and ice. Furrowing her brow, she looked back at him.

The wild man kicked a stone into the water. To Astrid's surprise, several of the dragons beneath the surface began to glow, and she gasped at the sight of the luminescent tidal class beasts that swam and wriggled frantically. "Oh my gods!" she exclaimed on an awed exhale. "They're-"

And then she was cut off. There was a groan, and then disgruntled squeaks of baby dragons. The smile dropped from her face as she whirled around. Her movement was too quick- pain lashed through her injury- but shock kept her from even noticing. What she had _thought_ was a snow drift shifted, breathed. And then it rose and turned. What had appeared to be icicles became jaw and crown fins. A mouth that could swallow a hundred of her whole grumbled in a voice that seemed to shake the earth beneath her. Without meaning to, Astrid released a terrified whimper.

Hiccup laughed, and she swallowed hard when she realized that drew the beast's attention. It was impossibly huge- bigger even than the queen they'd seen at dragon island. Slitted pupils slid down to evaluate the two humans on its shore. Then it settled back into the water, making an enormous wave lap up over the edge and reach for Astrid's knees.

"What... is _that_?" she breathed, afraid to raise her voice.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Hiccup fold himself into a low bow. "Our alpha," he answered, no fear in his tone. "The Bewilderbeast."

Her heart pounded in her chest as she examined the giant. It blinked slowly, not moving his gaze from her. She had the feeling that it was looking past her face and seeing into the very darkest corners of her mind. With all she was learning about dragons, she wouldn't put it past the thing.

"Is it upset that I'm here?" she whispered.

"If he was upset, you wouldn't _be_ here," Hiccup teased. "Say hello."

That seemed foolish. She didn't expect Toothless to meet Stoick with a handshake. So with a hard gulp, she pressed her hand to her fluttering pulse and bobbed her head, dropping her gaze.

When she glanced back up, Hiccup was smiling oddly at her. The Bewilderbeast exhaled what looked like steam, until the little breeze reached the shore and she shivered at the spray of ice crystals. Then his eyes floated away.

"You're in," Hiccup informed her, coming to sit next to her. "He approves."

"I'd hate to see what he'd do if he didn't," she thought aloud. Still unnerved, she forced herself to look away from the titan.

"He's gentle, unless he has to be otherwise." His smile was lopsided. "Don't worry about him. You wanted a bath, right?"

Astrid forced her apprehension to settle, for her heart to stop its nervous hammering. Nodding, she pushed up to her knees and steadied herself on Hiccup's shoulders as he undid her skirt. It fell around her thighs, and then his thumbs hooked inside her leggings and underwear. She held her breath and tried to remember what Hiccup had told her earlier about sex and nakedness. That it was natural. That he'd never known a reason to be embarrassed of it until her. But this was so different than being undressed under his heated gaze. This exposure felt more like nudity to her.

"You're gonna bite your lip off," he muttered, helping her out of her clothes. Setting everything she'd need for her bath on the shore, he then stood and removed his own pants and bandages. Astrid drew her teeth back into her mouth, averting her gaze.

"This water's probably the cleanest you'll find in the world." Kneeling, he unknotted her wraps and gently began to peel them away from her skin. The freedom was already an improvement on her feeling of sticky grossness. "It'll probably even help this heal- though- looks like Toothless' spit is doing a good enough job of it anyways."

Astrid cringed away from the thought. "Whatever you say, dragon-boy."

He shot her a playful glance. Then he was wading into the water. His arm reached out for her. "Okay. Your bath is ready."

She snorted, leaning on her right side as she crawled to the edge and stared at the glittering surface. Apprehension gripped her as she thought about the water's icy source- would it be as frigid as it looked? Braving a toe in the lake, she was thoroughly surprised to find it brisk- but not freezing. Scooting closer, she allowed Hiccup to help her past the short drop.

One of the glowing dragons wiggled past them as she settled on her knees beneath the water. Like that, it came just high enough to cover her breasts and leave her shoulders exposed. She was pleased.

Closing her eyes, she sighed and basked in the delicious feeling of cool refreshment. It was just cold enough to feel good to her aching muscles, but not so icy that she shivered. Astrid felt over a week of grime and ick wash away, along with the stale odor her body had produced sweating out the after effects of Stormfly's poison. While she used her cupped hands to splash herself, Hiccup rubbed himself down with the bar of soap he'd brought from the main room.

She found herself stealing glances at the expanses of pale, freckled skin. It took her back to the night of their first kiss, when she'd caught him bathing half dressed in the cove's lake. She'd felt guilty then for watching, but now she just felt bashful.

From what she could tell in the half-dark, his lacerations were healing just fine without his stitches. The thought had worried her, but they were already scabbed over and pink around the edges. It made

her wonder what her own injury looked like, if Toothless' saliva was really as effective as his rider proclaimed. She noticed a little bruising around the cuts, but that was also yellowed and fading. With a frown, she wondered if the thought of his dead dragon brother bothered him more than the scars he'd left behind. Probably so.

Instead of thinking on it, she let her gaze slide upwards, to the shape of his shoulders. They weren't particularly muscular or anything, like Snotlout's, but they were broad and defined. She especially liked the spray of dots that seemed to dust his skin. Her eyes dipped lower, down the flexing muscles of his arms and the tapering to his wrist. He scrubbed at his stomach, and she examined the faint shadows of his abdominals. Her teeth were burrowing back into her bottom lip. She was following the wispy trail of hair from his navel lower and lower until she hit the water's surface and heard a clearing throat.

Astrid snapped to attention, quickly drawing her gaze away. She resumed wetting her skin innocently, though she could see him smirking at her in her peripheral vision. Mouth pursed, she ignored him.

Hiccup made a clicking noise, and it took Astrid a moment to realize he was speaking to her. At her baffled gaze, he shook his head. "Sorry. C'mere."

She allowed him to pull her to her feet and tug her close. At first, she expected him to tease her for being caught staring, but he only ran soapy hands over her arms and neck. He was very careful when he moved to her back, but suds still slid past her wound. She hissed and pressed into his chest, nails digging into his waist as she flinched at the sharp sting.

"Sorry," he blurted. "Sorry sorry." Quickly rinsing away the burning soap, he blew gently on the back of her shoulder. Goosebumps raced down her spine. She shivered, and it wasn't completely because of the cold.

Astrid pressed her cheek against the warmth of his chest, careful not to disturb his injuries. She thought of how at ease he seemed here and let him wash her back with steady hands. It was as if he was pressed on by an invisible gravity on Berk, one she hadn't noticed until she saw him in his home and picked out the little details. The smoothness in his crouch, the ownership in the way he carried himself. The way he slipped in and out of his dragon talk without realizing it. She realized that this was who he was when there was nothing else he had to be. Where he didn't have to be self conscious of his wildness.

"Does it feel good to be home?" she murmured, letting him turn her so that he could reach her front. It didn't slip her notice that his hands lingered on her breasts- in fact, it sent almost painful thrills of excitement darting between her thighs- but he didn't make any obvious attempts at anything other than washing her.

"Mmm," he hummed in affirmative. "It feels good to have you in my home." He traced the outline of her waist, scrubbed the soap over her navel in loose, wide circles.

"Hey, Hiccup," she began.

"Mm?"

Astrid nodded her head towards the shore, where the scissors and knife she'd asked him to bring lay. "Will you shave for me?"

His hands paused, but quickly resumed their work. "Yes. Why?"

She pressed her lips together, sealing them against the urge to tell him that she wanted him to look more human. She'd already made the mistake once of calling him anything but, and she wasn't about to let something like that slip again. All she wanted was for him to look nice. For when he met his father. And for her.

"Do you trust me?" she said instead. Hopefully it wouldn't come off as some weird life or death thing. She just wasn't ready to explain herself quite yet.

"Of course."

"Then do it. Please. I'll tell you later."

Hiccup accepted her promise without any questions, passing the slippery, sharp-smelling soap into her hands before moving for the shore. While his back was turned, she washed the parts of herself that she was still embarrassed to let him touch. Then she dipped her head back into the water and let her sticky braid drink in the cool moisture. She quickly untied it while he wasn't watching, running the soap through her locks before detangling the knots with her fingers. Her eyes stayed on him in case he turned and caught her.

Watching him shave was both fascinating and a little nerve-wracking. Astrid tried not to let on that she was paying attention, but with every scrape of the blade across his neck, she cringed. He'd mentioned he wasn't great at it, and so every time she heard him swear under his breath, she was hit with a pang of anxiety and guilt. For some reason she felt the need to take the knife and do it herself, but that was just her controlling nature trying to break free. She'd likely be even worse than he was at working with the impromptu razor.

So she washed her hair and watched him shave his. After he set down the knife, sporting a new nick or two around his throat, she took the scissors to his long nails. She scraped the tip of the blade underneath, ensuring no dirt or dust was left behind. Then she murmured for him to wash his own tangled mop before trimming it into something manageable. It stayed more than long enough to tie back into his normal braid, but she cut off frayed ends and wrapped knots that were attempting to become dreadlocks.

She wasn't able to do all she wanted- her left arm tired quickly, and she couldn't work with just her right. But that was okay. She didn't want to change him too much. Just clean him up a little. In the end, she was pleased.

When he turned and reached up to feel the remains of his hair, his expression was unsure. He lifted a brow at her, as if to ask how he looked, and her heart fluttered at the sight of his jawline, usually hidden beneath his scruff. It made her blink, and her mouth pulled

into a proud smile. He looked handsome.

He looked like a Viking.

* * *

><p>"Astrid," he whispered sometime during the night.<p>

She stirred, shifting her naked body against his. "Hmm?"

His thumb traced absently along the slope of her neck, his touch just firm enough to not tickle. "You're not... ashamed of me? Are you?"

Blinking her eyes open, she adjusted her head on the pillow of his arm. "No." She knew he was confused by her grooming session. She caught him rubbing his chin several times during the evening. "Is this because I asked you to shave?"

Hiccup didn't answer. He hooked his knee around hers. "I would understand. You want your people to trust me. When we go back."

"That's part of it."

He didn't hesitate. "What's the other part?"

Her next move took a little strategizing. She wanted to twist and face him, but her shoulder wouldn't allow her to lie on her left side. So she had to push herself into a sitting position. Astrid rested her chin against her collarbone so she could look at him.

"I love you," she murmured. The admission fell easily from her lips. Even if the words she'd spoken to him in the kill ring had been a fevered dream, he had to have known by now how she felt about him.

He pushed up on his elbows. "I love you too." In the firelight, his expression was one of confusion, but she could also detect the pleasure he took in the short exchange. That simple trade of words.

Astrid wet her lips. "Why?"

The etch in his brow deepened. A faint irritation flickered in his eyes, and he lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. "I don't... That's not how love works, Astrid." He shook his head at her. "There's no combination of characteristics that can earn somebody's love. There's not some kind of list that people have to match to be worthy of affection."

She could sense his aggravation, so she used her weak hand to stroke his shoulder and assure him she wasn't going anywhere.

"I love you because of all the things you are," he continued, twisting until he was sitting up. "Things you aren't. I love you because you were the one to find me. I love you despite that." Hiccup frowned at her. "You are Astrid. Brave. Self-sacrificing. A little hard to get to know, but compassionate and caring. You're-you're just Astrid. And until you understand that I know who that

is better than you seem to, you're never going to believe me."

"I do," she told him softly. "I do." Drawing her knees under her, she leaned into him and pressed her lips against his. They were hard, still unhappy with her. "I just wanted to hear you say it."

"Is that why you made me shave?" His voice was accusing. "Is that some Viking expression of love?"

A weak smile pulled at her mouth. Dropping her gaze to his jaw, she caressed the bare skin with the backs of her fingers. Something like nervousness fluttered in her breast. "It's customary for the man to be well groomed before his wedding," she informed him, hoping she didn't waver as much as she thought she did. "We won't get one for a while, but I thought we could do what we could about other traditions."

The agitation seemed to be draining from his expression, only to be replaced by something like impatient perplexity. His brows knit together, and the tendons in his jaw twitched as he clenched it.

Astrid opened her mouth, searching for another way to explain. But she could only think of one. Holding onto him for balance, she straddled his lap and smoothed her palm against his cheek. Then she took a shaky breath and gently pushed his head at an angle.

His arm wrapped around her as she lowered her lips to his neck. She kissed him once. Twice. And then lapped her tongue against his skin before sinking her teeth into the warm flesh. Beneath her, Hiccup inhaled sharply. His fingertips dug into her waist. Afraid to hurt him- afraid not to- she bore down a little harder than she wanted to and sucked in a way she knew would send blood rushing to the surface. She might not have the sharp teeth of a female dragon, but she could leave a mark in her own way.

He moaned as she worked the patch of skin with her mouth. Against her thigh, she felt him twitching to life. It seemed he finally understood her meaning.

When she finally released the side of his throat with a wet noise of broken suction, her fingers immediately went to trace the round circle of her teeth marks. Just that damp friction made his breathing harsh, and his other hand rose to bury in her braid. "Astrid," he rasped into her collarbone. "Are you mine?"

In answer, she guided his face back to hers. She kissed him.

Hiccup made a rumbling noise in his chest, drawing her close against him. His hands blindly explored her bare curves, learning the angles of her hipbones and searching for the swells of her breasts beneath her fresh bandages. His mouth was hot and hungry, his tongue barreling past her lips to stroke hers- to explore the insides of her cheeks and the blunt edges of her teeth. He held her like he worshiped her. The thrill of his naked stomach pressed against hers made her legs tremble. A damp arousal began to heat between them.

"My hair," she murmured. "Take it down."

In any other situation, she would have been offended by how quickly he tore away from her. Astrid felt a blush rise in her cheeks as he immediately pulled the cord from her plait. It was tossed aside without even a glance. His eyes were dark, hardly a ring of viridian encircling his fathomless pupils. He ran his fingers through the blonde waves, which were still a little damp from their earlier bath.

She felt the soft weight of her locks settling over her shoulders and thought of the first night he'd come to her window. She'd had her braid down then, but neither of them had noticed until after she left to fetch him a towel. It had made her heart almost stop, to think of someone other than the man she wanted to pledge herself to seeing the thick, curling mess undone. Now he was that person, and he was staring at her hair like it was spun gold. Hiccup brought a fistful of frizzy blonde to his nose and inhaled deeply. He was hard and throbbing beneath her.

After a moment, he pushed her hair over her shoulders and moved his mouth to her throat. She gasped at the feeling of his wet tongue sliding over her pulse point, licking across the muscles of her neck. Desire bled through her veins, making her heart race and her head light. Her thighs tightened around his hips. His lips moved lower, and then he was biting and licking at the bandages that were becoming uncomfortably tight. The necessary layer drove her mad- she craved his touch there, the wet heat of his mouth closing over her nipples. Her body ached for him.

"I want to taste you again," he breathed, and- dazed as she was- she thought he was expressing his own dissatisfaction with her bandaging.

But no. His arms wrapped around her waist, lifting her up and off of his lap. For a brief, baffled moment, she attempted to speak half-formed protests, confused questions. But then he was laying her down on the furs and crawling over her body. Her shoulder twinged at the pressure, but it was background noise compared to the fire blazing where he kissed.

Hiccup dropped soft brushes of affection across her collarbone, along the edges over bandages. He traced the faint lines of her ribs as they appeared with every heavy inhale. Those gasping breaths turned helpless the farther he moved, becoming a nervous whimper when he nibbled at her hips and licked the skin just beneath her navel.

Then his hands parted her, and her knees were drawn up until she was bare to him. Astrid tried to resist the urge to cover herself, fixing her eyes on his face and nibbling apprehensively at the inside of her cheek. Hiccup's warm breath steamed along the inside of her thigh. He tilted his head to rasp his clean-shaven jaw against the sensitive flesh.

"You have so many scars," he murmured into a kiss placed higher-closer. On the outside of her knee, his fingers reached up to explore the gnarled, rippled skin of her long-healed burn. Further towards her hip, there were places where the nerves had yet to return. But where his fingertips danced was perfect, just perfect. "Are they all from dragons?"

"Most," she replied, a tremor in her voice. "Some from training."

He slid his palm over her scarred and mottled thigh. She expected there was more he wanted to say, but his gaze focused on the gold curls at her center. Hiccup shifted, kneeling over her, and then he tested a single knuckle along her slick folds. She exhaled sharply.

When his tongue first delved through the wet heat of her core, Astrid arched. Her mouth fell open at the combination of shocked pleasure and the dull ache of her injury. Whispering his name, she wanted to stop him, to encourage him, to beg, but her thoughts were scattered links of broken chainmail. He searched her with his mouth, his tongue, groaning with his own obvious delight.

Her hands stole downward to tangle in his hair. The muscles in her abdomen flexed and rippled as she squirmed. In an awful torture, his lips closed over the nub of pure sensation at her peak, and her answering cry ricocheted off the cave walls. Her hips twisted, bucked, and Hiccup gripped her tightly to hold her in place.

She thought that would be her undoing- that the gentle sucking at her most sensitive place would finish her and leave her in pieces. But she was learning that Hiccup's curiosity would never allow him to be satisfied with staying still. He dipped lower, lapping at her dripping arousal. And then his tongue was burying inside of her, pressing with soft licks and pointed thrusts.

Astrid moaned and tugged at the soft bronze locks of his crown. Her gasps and pleas were becoming impossible to repress, her body both trying to escape the dangerous edge of desire and hurtle towards it. His grip was bruising on her hips, his warm invasion unbearable. She trembled beneath his terrible, wonderful mouth and tried to remember to breathe.

Hiccup whispered something, but she was too gone to understand it. The flat of his hand pressed down on her navel, securing her in place, and then he teased two fingers at her entrance. Astrid attempted to shift and greedily take the exquisite pleasure for herself, but he restrained her. Forced them inside with a painful slowness. Her lips moved in quiet, desperate begging, needing more- harder- faster. He responded with an obedience that could have made her weep. And then just when she thought she couldn't take any more, Hiccup lowered his mouth again and sucked relentlessly at her hard pearl.

She felt all of her muscles clench as she shattered. Ecstasy slammed into her, sharp as knives and merciless. A stream of pleas and relieved cries and _Hiccup, yes hnn yes Hiccup please _tumbled from her in needy mewls. He didn't slack, didn't fade until after the excruciating pleasure left her weak and panting and misted with a sheen of cold sweat.

There was a hunger in his eyes when he lifted his face from between her thighs. He didn't slide his fingers away, still sinking into her with slow cruelty. "Tell me to stop and I will," he rasped, his voice tight and controlled. "I- I don't want to hurt you."

Her gaze dared down his body, observing the strong jut of his length as it stood away from his hips. She wanted it. More than she could understand, she wanted him to take her, claim her. She wanted to

belong to him.

And it was at that moment that she realized there was a new warmth spreading over her shoulder. Astrid winced and lifted off of her shoulder- her writhing had been too much. "I think- I think I'm bleeding."

Hiccup's expression went unreadable. His jaw twitched. Then he smoothed a gentle hand over her stomach and nodded, tearing his gaze away. "Stay here. I'll get-"

"No-" She pushed up to her elbow and grabbed his forearm so hard she realized her nails would probably leave half-moons in his skin. She looked at him imploringly. "Please. We're not finished yet."

Astrid moved her hand from his arm to his neck, tracing the dark bruise she'd left there. Something fierce flashed in his eyes, and he reached up, curling his fingers around hers. He brought them to his lips. Then he settled back over her still-shaking form.

"Off your back," he whispered, gripping her waist on her good side and giving her a rough tug. Though her muscles were slow to respond, she was overwhelmingly happy to oblige. After twisting to her hands and knees, she felt him inspecting her shoulder, prodding at the bandages. Then his fingers trailed down her spine. The warmth of his body bore down on hers, and she wasn't sure if it was the fire of his arousal twitching against her thighs or the open-mouthed kiss he left between her shoulder blades that made her keen with want.

His arm wrapped around her waist, taking some of her weight off of her arms, and then she felt him guiding his length just past the place where she wanted him most. Hissing, he slid between her melting flesh until he was slick and wet and she was pressing back in an attempt to control the direction of his pressing hips. Imperative desire made her ache for him, hunger for him. There was sense of fulfillment she couldn't achieve without him, and she yearned for it more than she could remember ever wanting anything.

Astrid was ready to beg again, but then she felt him nudging at her entrance. Her words were choked back with a gasp of relief. It wasn't until later that she realized she never felt a whisper of nervousness. The affections he murmured into her back, the soft squeeze of his hand at her waist- they were right, just like the way he impaled her with slow tenderness was right. Her eyes fluttered closed. Her lungs worked to draw thin strands of air though her teeth.

For some reason, she had anticipated the friction. The tight discomfort as her muscles adjusted to his invasion. What she hadn't counted on was the fullness. He seemed to fit into her entire body, making her aware of the intricate workings of blood pulsing through her system, oxygen filling her chest, the natural cycles of womanhood that suddenly all at once made sense. The thoughts that had terrified her as a girl- being broken apart and filled with the life-giving possibility of a man's seed- it didn't scare her anymore. She craved it.

An impossible flurry of thoughts beat at the inside of her mind, ideas and revelations flashing so quickly that she was completely taken aback when Hiccup slowly began to withdraw. Inexplicable

despair squeezed her heart like a fist.

"Hiccup, what-" She began to question his retreat. Her forehead crumpled in disappointment. Then she glanced over her shoulder just in time to catch the focused concentration in his expression- just before he surged his hips forward again.

Astrid cried out, mouth falling open with helpless pleasure. He placed another kiss at the base of her neck. Repetition became a hard master, the overwhelming slam of his blistering arousal followed by a quick escape replaying in the space of every breath. Her arms trembled against the drumming rhythm, her inner muscles working in an inherent cadence. With every thrust, she clenched around him. With every retreat, she whimpered and prepared for the next crash of his flesh against hers. Her hips pressed back against him, trying to meet his every blow.

At her ear, his groans were a cluttered combination of dragon language and human swears. Her name peppered each muttered promise against her skin- "My Astrid, my mate, ah- Hel and gods above, you're mine." _

She tried to hold her own against the battering force of his lovemaking, but her body was still recovering. Her left arm gave out first, and then her right forced her to her elbows. Hiccup's hand tested the bandages at her shoulder, and then he tightened his grip around her waist. She was yanked up onto his lap, her back pressed against his chest. The change in angle speared him deeper into her tight heat. Her nails clawed at the arm barred at her ribs.

He mumbled his love for her against her bandages. Then she felt him gathering her hair aside, wrapping it around his hand. His rough thrusts became a gentle rocking, a maddening combination of friction and fullness that had her seeing stars. The slick warmth of his tongue slid against the nape of her neck.

He bit down there, with just barely more strength than was comfortable. The sharp cut of his teeth was a distracting pain, but it blended with the smooth pleasure of his cock throbbing inside her.

Hiccup's actions became less gentle. He growled, sucking at the patch of skin worked between his teeth. His fingers pulled at her hair and dug into her waist. He pushed into her without tenderness, without concern for her injury or exhaustion. It was the wildness in him- the animalistic ferality that she knew beat at the walls of his control, roaring and snarling for him to possess her in every sense of the word. Her soft whimpers became sharp yelps of discomfort and ecstasy. She wondered if his canines would draw blood.

Then he released her. Licked at the raw flesh and panted hot exhales into her neck. Letting her hair fall aside, his hand reached around her and blindly groped at the place where they were joined before fumbling for her clit.

She was shoved over the precipice of pleasure without warning, choking on his name as she rippled and fluttered around him. It wasn't perfect- his hand was trembling as hard as hers, and it was clumsy as she arched and bucked beneath the waves of her orgasm. But it was enough. She broke above him, her pieces scattering through

time. She felt the initial lightning strike of sensation in her fingertips as she touched his palm for the first time, felt that electric bolt she'd run from when he'd held her close and licked her neck. It all focused into one cataclysmic, all-consuming crash.

"Astrid," Hiccup swallowed hard and pressed his forehead into her spine. "Astrid."

And then she knew he was following her into that abyss. His strokes faltered, staggered, and he crushed her close as he shivered and hissed and spilled inside her. She knew he was experiencing the same sort of soldering bond, the almost awful forging of their souls together. The sounds of their panting against the cave walls blended into one heavy echo.

And as he clutched her weary body against his, kissing her sweaty skin and making whispered oaths, she knew that what they'd just done could never be undone. Not by either of them, not by any man or dragon, and not by any of the gods in heaven or hel.

22. Chapter 22

Chapter Twenty-Two

The echoing argument washing into her little cave room was so bizarre that she thought she was still dreaming when it stirred her from her sleep. The furs were warm around her, tickling her bare skin and smelling of Hiccup. Her hands slid over the makeshift bed, searching for his body, but her fingers only wove through empty fur.

Blinking blearily, she stirred and sat up. Voices clattered off of the walls, and she picked out Hiccup's frustrated growl.

"I _had _to. She was dying, and I had no way of knowing if they could stop the poison."

Someone else spoke back with an angry bite. A woman, older. "Yeh could have led them here! They could arrive at any moment!"

"They won't! The dragons are too fast." His defensive tone made Astrid sharpen. Sleep was chased away by alarm, and she slid her legs over the side of his bed.

"Yeh don't know that," the woman countered. His mother. The chief's lost wife. Valka. "And yeh can't just take her from her people, Hiccup! She's a person, not a dragon!"

"Of course she's a person! That's why I had to bring her. She's the one I told you about- the one who's been helping me."

"The _heir's intended_? Hiccup!"

"She's not-"

"Do yeh not understand the danger you've put the nest in? I told yeh not to trust any of them- they only know violence and killing and hate!"

Astrid gripped the wall. Setting her feet on the cold stone floor, she pulled herself out of bed with a soft grunt. There was a new soreness in her muscles- one that wasn't a result of Stormfly's poison dart. This one radiated in her lower belly, her back, her thighs and buttocks. It was an ache left behind by their lovemaking, a physical reminder of what had happened the night before.

"That's not true. They can change. I've seen it."

She frowned and bit her lip, searching the floor for her clothes. Hiccup had taken them to wash after their bath, but she wasn't sure what happened to them while they dried. Her eyes fell on a balled up lump in the corner. Shuffling slowly, not letting go of the smooth stone wall, she rounded the room and picked up the bundle from the floor. It was Hiccup's shirt- the one slashed by Mongrel's talons and stained with blood. It would reveal her bandages and leave her legs bare, but she winced and grit her teeth against the pain in her shoulder as she pulled it on.

"Believe me, son, I tried too. Yeh have no idea how many times I tried to convince them. Not even yer father would listen to me."

"Stoick?"

Astrid felt her heart skip at the name. She'd almost forgotten that he'd heard her tell Gothi who he was and whose he was. She forced her still-weak muscles to cooperate as she moved her feet forward.

Valka's voice held a note of shock as it warbled through the tunnels. "You- yeh met him?"

Hiccup paused before answering. "No. But I will. As soon as Astrid's better, we-"

"What..." She suddenly interrupted him. A new tremor of something anxious and odd crept in her tone. "What is that? On your neck."

Astrid's hand flew beneath her loose hair. She couldn't feel the imprint of Hiccup's teeth anymore, but the spot was tender to the touch. Cringing, she realized exactly what it was his mother was pointing out. She halted and tried to work up the courage to continue.

If he was embarrassed, though, he didn't show it in his tone. Of course he wasn't embarrassed. He saw nothing improper in what they'd done. "You know what it is," he told her lowly. "That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"You've been laying with her?" The quiet confusion was gone, replaced by sharp disbelief. "With a Viking girl who kills and tortures dragons?"

That pressed Astrid's feet forward again. She scowled and shuffled through the tunnel, able to make out the light of morning up ahead.

"It was a little more than laying, Mom."

Oh gods, let the poison come back with a vengeance before she made it to the main room.

"How could yeh be so foolish, Hiccup!"

"Are you even listening to me?" her mate growled. "I told you, she changed. She- she came up with the idea of a prosthesis for Toothless, and she kept us safe, and she has her own dragon now."

Astrid paused when the Haddocks' cavern home opened in front of her. It looked impossibly different in the daylight, sunshine pouring in from the green and lush sanctuary outside. She could see flashes of color in the distance as dragons flew by, and she noticed details- like the burned place in the corner where some fire-breather must have made their bed. Despite the warm temperature, ice still clung around the cave walls, dripping and dribbling little songs beneath the echo of Valka and Hiccup's argument.

The two in question were both standing, glaring each other down in the center of the room. Hiccup was dressed- she prayed a short thanks for that little blessing- in his pants and a clean shirt, but Valka was clothed in full riding armor. She still held her own intricately handmade staff with a white-knuckled grip at her side.

"She's a Viking. She was raised ta kill and fight. People are not capable of change- some of us are-"

"Born different, and some of us aren't," Hiccup finished for her. It must have been one of the several adages she'd repeated to him over the years. His hands were fists. "You're wrong. They can change. She has, and they will."

"When they find out about yeh, they'll turn against yeh. And so will she. Humans are not like dragons. They don't have the honor." The chief's wife looked incredibly intimidating, with her deep frown and an electric crackling in her eyes. Astrid couldn't make out the pale color of them from where she stood, but she could see the similarities in the woman and her son. Hair a shade lighter than Hiccup's was braided back and streaked with grey near her temples. He had her forehead, Stoick's nose. His father's jaw and his mother's cheekbones. It was astounding.

That was when a Night Fury came bounding in the room, curling playfully around Hiccup and nudging him towards the outer area. He obviously wanted to go flying. When he wasn't immediately catered to, his florescent eyes fell on Astrid, and he gave a happy bark to see her out of bed. She was unable to draw a smile, after hearing Valka's harsh judgment, but she held her free hand out to him. Toothless scrambled over and gave her his head for scratches.

The Haddocks looked up from their debate and over at her. The blonde let her hand slip from the wall, trying to surreptitiously lean against Toothless. She didn't want to seem weak in front of them.

Valka's eyes raked down the girl's frame, her expression tight with thinly veiled disapproval. Her lips pursed as she slowly crossed the room. She had that same graceful prowl in her steps. It would seem

she had as little respect for personal space as her son as well- she stopped just inches from Astrid. Tugging aside the shoulder of Hiccup's shirt, she inspected the silvery scars clawed across her collarbone. She leaned to glance at the edge of the twisted burn on her thigh. Then she slipped the hooked tip of her staff through the slashes in Hiccup's shirt, barely brushing the bandages beneath.

"And what did this?" Valka finally asked, pulling the ruined garment away from Astrid's torso. There was a note of contempt in her tone, and it was clear that the question was pointed toward her son. "One of their weapons, I imagine?"

Astrid's gaze flicked to Hiccup. Pain shot through his features, sharp and clear, and as he was parting his lips to speak, she interrupted. "A dragon," she answered for him. "Under the queen's control." At her side, Toothless nudged her hip as if in encouragement.

The woman's mouth twitched, but she dropped the shirt and moved back to Hiccup. "Go ta the garden," she told him tersely. "Bring me carrot seed and rue."

His face contorted with bafflement, and he blinked. "What? Why?"

"Just do as I say, Hiccup." Valka's terse reply made it clear that she would brook no arguments. "Be careful with the carrot seed."

He looked to Astrid, obviously reluctant to either obey or disobey. She didn't have the nerve to smile, but she gave him a short nod of assurance. The chief's lost wife was intimidating, but Astrid had stared down her own angry mother. She could handle this one.

"C'mon, Toothless," Hiccup grumbled. The Night Fury bounded to him, tongue hanging sloppily from the side of his mouth. Astrid immediately missed his aid, but she steeled herself. The young man gave his mother one last glance of what looked like warning before swinging himself into Toothless' saddle and taking off into the outer realm of the sanctuary.

Several long heartbeats of silence passed between the two women. Instead of speaking, Valka turned on her heel and picked up a pitcher resting on the stone tabletop. Her silence was thick, the tension in her shoulders obvious as she crossed the room to a trickling icicle and tilted the mouth of the pitcher towards its crystal-clear stream.

"Sit," she finally told Astrid. Not looking over at the girl, she carried the water back to what Astrid had guessed was a stove or an oven and poured it into a cast iron cauldron. Then she set it to boil over the weak fire.

"I'm okay," she lied. Her knees weren't trembling as badly as she'd expected them to, thank Odin, but she was starting to feel a little out of breath.

"Nadder poison has killed men three times yer size," Valka replied flatly. Turning her back again, she went to a small trunk pushed against the wall and lifted the lid. "Don't pretend yeh don't still

feel the after effects. Sit."

Mouth pressed in a tight line, Astrid did so. It was more of a relief than she'd admit, lowering herself onto the bench-like seating around the fire pit. Tucking her ankles aside primly, she tried not to be embarrassed by her near-nakedness around Hiccup's mother. It was an awkward position for sitting, but anything else would send the hem of the shirt she wore even further up her thighs. Her fingers laced together and wrung awkwardly while she chewed at the inside of her cheek.

She watched the odd grace in Valka's shoulders as the woman dug through the trunk and extracted a flat little wooden box. Flipping it open, she seemed to ponder something for a moment before selecting a few items. Then she shut the container once more and set it back in the trunk. When she straightened and returned to the fire, Astrid noticed that they were faintly recognizable herbs in her fist. Valka dropped the leaves and stalks into the warming water with a frown.

"What's that for?" Astrid asked. An odd thought struck her that maybe being away from civilization for so long had made the chief's wife more inclined to the occult. Maybe she dabbled in magicks, like Gothi.

Her answer was preceded by a loud clatter. Pulling her stiff armor over her head, Valka dropped the heavy chest piece next to a set of baskets. Then she said, "Moon tea. Though there's no telling how effective it'll be." The last part was muttered, as if to herself. "Drunk too late with a half-remembered recipe..."

Both indignation and mortification shot through Astrid's spine. Her cheeks felt hot, and she cut her gaze to the side. "Hiccup and I aren't children anymore. We're capable of making our own decisions."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Valka's bobbing nod. "Yeh may not think of yerselves as children. But Hiccup very much still is, where humans are concerned." After shedding the rest of her armor, she moved to sit across from the blonde. She folded her arms in front of her. "It's too late to undo what yeh've done. But I'll advise yeh not ta encourage any further affections from my son. For his good and yer own."

Astrid lifted her head, meeting the woman's steady stare with accusation. "What do you know about what we've done? You've only just met me."

Outside, a dragon screeched and shot by, sending a wispy breeze into the room.

Valka kept her temper better than the younger woman. "I know yeh broke yer contract by lying with him. I know yeh've been filling his head with false hopes at best, and setting him up for betrayal at worst. I know yeh left a mark on him without possibly knowing what it could mean."

"The bitemark?" Astrid's hand went to the back of her neck in reflex, and she noticed how his mother's eyes followed the motion.

"Yes. The bitemark." Her words were clipped. "It's more than just an expression of passion ta Hiccup. It's a--"

"A claim," the girl finished for her. "Signifying that he's mine and I'm his."

The surprise on the older woman's face was extremely satisfying. Astrid allowed herself the pleasure of letting a little confidence into her tone. "I know it's how the dragons mark their mates. And I know dragons mate for life." As an annoyed afterthought, she added, "And I broke my contract before Hiccup and I were together."

There was an interesting glint in Valka's gaze. "And how did the Jorgensons take the news? When yeh told them yeh were breaking it for a boy who thinks he's a dragon?"

Astrid grit her teeth. "Hiccup's more than that and you know it. He knows exactly how human he is, no thanks to you." The last dig wasn't intentional, but she found it slipping out before she could stop herself. After it was said, though, she decided that it was her true feelings anyways.

Valka's brows rose. "You think I was wrong ta raise him away from Berk."

She didn't answer. She pressed her lips together and let her level look speak for itself.

Hiccup's mother nodded. "I knew others would think so. I've known it his whole life." There was a squawk nearby that sounded Nadder-like. "But until yeh have a child, until yeh have to pick up yer screaming infant from his burning cradle, yeh will never know how dangerous a place like Berk is."

"I know perfectly well!" Astrid abruptly laughed without humor. Tilting her knee, she lifted the hem of Hiccup's shirt to expose the burn usually well-hidden by her leggings. The same scar he'd rubbed his fingertips across with tenderness the night before. "You saw this- you think I'm under the impression that Berk is the safest village in Midgard?" Releasing the fabric with a little more force than necessary, she continued. "I'd rather spend a lifetime being burned and bitten and clawed than grow up without my father- without knowing where I really belong."

"Because yeh had the luxury of living," Valka hissed. It was the first Astrid had seen of the temper beneath the woman's calm exterior. She noticed that when she got angry, she bared her teeth a little, just like Hiccup did. "Many were not so lucky. And I was not going ta take that risk with my son. Not after learning there was another way."

"And now that he's older? Will you still try and hide him from the rest of the world?" She was glad that she seemed to finally be getting under her skin. "Not having social skills doesn't make him a child. He's all grown up. He doesn't need you to protect him."

"I've never hidden him! I advised him. Guided him. Kept him away from men like his father that would sooner kill him than believe that dragons aren't evil."

"The chief wouldn't!" she growled, even as she remembered the painful grip of the man's fist around her arm. "If he knew that Hiccup was alive- that you were alive... He'd do everything in his power to keep you with him."

"The man I married would never understand." Valka lifted her chin a fraction. Her eyes- a greyish green shade that reminded Astrid of the way grassy mountaintops looked like in the clouds- were clear and guiltless. "He's a good man. A loving husband and a brave chief. But he wouldn't know what to do with a boy like Hiccup."

Talons scraped on stone. A black blur flashed into the cavern, and Toothless squeezed around the glowing fire. He gave both women a gummy grin.

They looked up to see his rider crawling inside, his expression drawn as he crossed the room and threw the herbs pinched between his fingers into the boiling water. Then he straightened. He fixed his mother in a glare, and Astrid realized he was clenching his jaw. "My father... Stoick..." Hiccup exhaled sharply and shook his head. "He's the chief?"

Valka appeared sobered. Taken aback. Maybe even nervous. "Yes," she answered quietly. "Yer father is Stoick the Vast. Chief of Berk."

The way his brow momentarily crumpled made Astrid's chest throb with a shared ache. It also felt a little bit like regret- this certainly wasn't how she wanted him to find out. Hiccup took a step back, raking his fingers through his hair. "You didn't- You never- Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it shouldn't change anything, Hiccup." Valka stood, holding her palms out in gentle defense. "Yeh've seen what they're like. Yeh told me yerself that they turned on Astrid the minute they found out."

"It changes everything," he argued. "He's my father- he's their leader- we could have changed things, Mom!"

"Hiccup, no." She shook her head. "I don't want yeh thinking that Stoick would make any exceptions for yeh just because you're his son. I was his wife, and he still never listened to me."

He wasn't listening either. He was already playing things out in his head. "Things could've been different! We could've gone back, gotten him to trust the dragons. And then all the villagers would've followed- after we took out the queen, Berk would've been safe! For Vikings and dragons!"

"Even if we could talk to him, the villagers wouldn't follow him just because he's the chief." Valka stepped forward, taking Hiccup's hands in hers. "And when you go back, they won't spare you just because you're his heir. They'll turn on you- just like they turned on Astrid."

Astrid wanted to protest. To say that they'd be safe. But while she was willing to put her life in Stoick's hands, she wasn't so sure how he'd react to Hiccup. Maybe he'd be just what Berk needed to see the light. Maybe he would be destroyed whether or not Stoick called for

it.

Something else seemed to be dawning on Hiccup's face. His mouth moved, attempting words that he couldn't seem to form. He searched his mother's face with eyes full of shock and bewilderment. "I'm the heir? Not Snotlout?"

"Snotlout's your cousin," Astrid whispered, and she winced when his head whipped to the side to stare at her. "His line would've taken the throne, since your father never sired any other sons."

"He hasn't?" Valka blurted at the exact moment Hiccup said, "Throne?"

She ignored his mother, looking at her mate with apologetic eyes. Even if he'd asked her not to tell him about his father... she should have. "That's why I told you his identity might save your life. If things go wrong."

Hiccup cut his gaze away, pulling his hands back from Valka's grasp. His chest rose and fell heavily, as though the revelation of his paternity had been a physical blow. Turning away from them, he walked towards the outside. Sunshine threw his silhouette into sharp relief, outlining his frame with gold light. Then he was dropping to all fours and crawling down and out of sight.

* * *

><p>Astrid was out of breath by the time Stormfly helped the girl slide off of her back and to the grass. Her legs immediately tried to buckle, but after a second, she was able to steady herself. Then she gave the Nadder an affectionate pat and walked slowly towards the lake's edge.<p>

Hiccup didn't hear her approaching. A small hatchling, some breed she didn't recognize, was weaving between his legs, climbing into his lap and squeaking playfully. Not shifting his gaze away from the water to look at the little dragon, he petted the creature distractedly. It chirped and nuzzled into his hand.

She paused, unsure of what to say. He'd been by the lakeside for hours, surly and unresponsive. Valka went down at one point, but Astrid could see even from one of the grassy cliffs that the two only engaged in more arguing. She'd watched as both mother and son fought out of earshot, their hands gesturing wildly and their expressions angry. When Valka stomped back through the caves, she was muttering under her breath about stubbornness.

"Your mom made dinner," she finally attempted, rubbing her arm awkwardly. Dinner might have been too gracious a word. It was certainly edible, but she wasn't sure it was technically food.

"That's unfortunate," Hiccup grumbled back. When he glanced over his shoulder at her, his eyes widened just a little bit before he adopted his scowl once more. "You should be resting. It'll still be a couple of days before you're back to normal."

Astrid's smile was uncertain. "A gentleman would invite a lady to sit."

"What's a gentleman?" He blinked, his usual curiosity gone. His features were neutral, unamused.

"Someone who doesn't let injured girls stand around while they sulk," she hinted, hoping a little prodding would ease him back into their usual comfortable dialogue.

Instead of replying, he just gestured vaguely to the grass next to him. She shuffled over and let her tired legs fold under her. Massaging her sore shoulder, she chuckled as the dragon in his lap rolled over and panted up at her. Hiccup shifted, sending the hatchling skittering away, and then he was laying his head in her lap. He sighed into her legs.

"Are you mad at me for not telling you about your dad?" she asked. Though she felt bad about it, she didn't think he had the right to blame her when he'd been the one to put it off in the first place. Still, guilt gnawed in her stomach. Maybe it was just the discomfort of seeing him upset.

His head shook back and forth. He moved his hand to her knee and drew circles into her leggings- clean and recovered by a frowning Valka- with his thumb. "You think she was wrong, don't you?"

Astrid traced his braid with her fingertips and shrugged. "Yeah. But I can appreciate that she thought she was trying to keep you safe."

"If she'd taken me back, after she learned that dragons were good..." He trailed off for a second, but then seemed to find his question again. "Would you have had a marriage contract with me? Would you hate me like you hate Snotlout?"

"I don't hate Snotlout," she corrected him. "I'm not fond of his father, but Snotlout... he cares for me. In his own way." That was clear enough in the way he'd panicked after Stormfly's dart had stabbed into her shoulder. "And I'm not- I wasn't engaged to him just because he was the heir. It helped, but it was his money. Even if you'd grown up on Berk, my parents might've still made that deal with the Jorgensons."

"What if I had asked first?" His voice sounded almost like a petulant little boy's, and Astrid smiled. She'd swear up and down to Valka that Hiccup wasn't a child anymore, but he was decidedly naive in the ways of Vikings. And apparently quite competitive.

"I dunno. Maybe I only like you for your feral, dragony charm. Maybe I would think Viking Hiccup was totally annoying."

He twisted his neck to fix her in a weak glare. "Viking Astrid isn't so great either. You kick in your sleep."

"A fact that Viking Hiccup might not have gotten to discover." She had to fight to keep a serious expression. "Viking Hiccup would've had to follow Viking rules. No sleeping in each other's bed, no baths together, definitely no mating..."

"Unless I married you," he reminded her grumpily. "Though I'm beginning to wonder what Snotlout sees in you anyways."

She gave him a smack in punishment. Then she went back to trailing her fingers through his hair. It was soft to the touch, and he sighed as her fingernails scraped gently over his scalp. They were quiet for a long moment. Around them, some dragons were settling in for the night, while others were just stirring awake. At the base of the waterfall, the Bewilderbeast was half submerged with his head under the surface. Large bubbles boiled and broke around his crown fins. Everything was calm.

"I'm worried my dad will hate me," Hiccup confessed. His breath warmed her legs as he spoke.

Astrid thought about the intimidating chief. The stony silence he'd worn like a shield her whole life. The way he'd looked at her the day her uncle left. The hate that had blazed in his eyes when he saw Cloudjumper on Berk. She couldn't forget how he'd treated her just a few days ago, but that was a man who thought his wife and son were dead. For as long as she could remember, she'd thought herself to be so much like Stoick. And she knew that no matter what her Uncle Finn did, if he showed up alive on her doorstep, she'd hug him tight and never let him leave again.

"I don't think he will," she told him, even though they were dangerous words. Anything that gave anybody hope on Berk was dangerous, but there was no telling if that rule applied in this dragon haven. "The chief is a good man. People used to talk about how different he was before his family died." She tugged on one of his braids, as if to say that's you. "And if he changed once, he can change again."

"My mother doesn't think so." The optimism and conviction he'd had that morning while arguing with Valka had disappeared. Astrid had never seen him so deflated.

Leaning over, she dropped a kiss on his temple. "She's worried. She can't predict what'll happen, so she'd rather you didn't go to him at all."

He was silent again. Every now and then he'd give a forlorn sigh or shift on her lap, but for the most part he was content to stare at the rippling water and let her stroke his hair. For a minute, she started to think he'd fallen asleep, but then he looked back at her.

"Astrid?"

"Yes, babe?"

His lips twisted with thought. "Why does your breath smell so weird?"

Indignation made her turn red. Her jaw dropped, and then she slapped a hand over her mouth. "You- I-" A combination of fury and embarrassment made her eyes wide. "I drank some nasty tea, okay? It wasn't exactly a pleasant experience for me either!"

"Why'd you drink gross tea? Did my mother make it?"

"We're not having this conversation."

"Why not? Does this have anything to do with the stuff I got from the garden?"

"Hiccup..."

"I want some. She's never made me tea before."

"No."

23. Chapter 23

****Chapter Twenty-three.****

"I think we should go back," Astrid whispered. "Tomorrow. Early. We could make it there by sunset."

Hiccup's knuckles trailed up and down her spine in wide circles. She was warm and comfortable on his lap, and they were reluctant to emerge from the mossy little niche where they'd holed up for the afternoon. It was a lucky find during a round of hide and seek with Toothless and a couple of hatchlings. Since Hiccup's room had become off limits with Valka around, they'd begun to find little hiding spots to avoid her watching gaze. She didn't stalk, per se, but her presence certainly added a particularly discouraging note to the air.

"One more day," he answered, nudging her braid over her shoulder with his nose and pressing kisses against her throat. "I want her to come with us... I just haven't figured out how to bring it up."

"You think she would?" Perhaps she should've tried harder to conceal the doubt in her voice, but the idea of Valka going anywhere near Berk with peaceful intentions seemed ridiculous. Every time either she or Hiccup mentioned returning to the island, his mother's mouth would drop into a fierce scowl. She must have known that Astrid had to return- it was her home- but she made no secret of the fact that she didn't want Hiccup leaving the nest again.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "Maybe."

Astrid was dubious.

Outside their little niche, rain dripped over the opening like a little personal rain. Through the trickling drops, Astrid could watch dragons flying and playing and swimming through the sanctuary. It was still an odd sight, even though she'd been there almost a week. These dragons were friendly and affectionate. They curled up next to her when she sat by the lakeside, staring at the enormous Bewilderbeast. They engaged her and Stormfly in all sorts of airborne games, all the versions of catch she played as a little girl. And when they weren't trying to pounce on Hiccup in one wrestling match or another, they were bumping into her hip or shoulder or legs and begging for attention.

It was weird, for a girl who'd spent her life fighting dragons. She'd seen them take men between their teeth and shake them like dolls. When Hiccup had told her that what she knew about dragons was wrong, he'd been right. She could finally believe him. That just made the

thought of going back even more intimidating.

Hiccup's fingers climbed up to find his claim beneath her braid. He liked staring at it, tracing it. Now he gently pressed into the bruise, smiling at her grumble of mild discomfort. Every now and then he'd prowl through the tunnels to find her and take her off guard. She'd be minding her own business when the feral boy would grab her around the waist, brush her braid aside, and sink his teeth into the spot that seemed to grow more sensitive by the day.

"Stroking your manly pride?" she snorted. Tugging on his hair, she chewed playfully at his shirt. Staying with the Haddocks was rubbing off on her.

"No idea what you mean," he spoke into her bangs, and she wasn't sure if he was serious or not. "But if you keep squirming like that, I'm going to start stroking something else."

Astrid flushed bright red. Being raised in the wild meant Hiccup missed a lot of innuendos, accidentally said things that Snotlout and Tuffnut would have snickered at. But it was rare that he actually made those sorts of comments on purpose. The teenage boy in him was showing, and as blushy as it made her, she kind of liked the idea of him joking around with the rest of the group like he was one of them.

"You know it's gonna be like this when we go back to Berk," she reminded him, nodding at their surroundings. "Hiding from people. Stealing minutes alone." Pressing her lips to his throat, she sighed, "Definitely no talking about mating."

"Because we're not married yet, right?"

"Right." Astrid found her own claim with her tongue, and he shivered. His grasp on her tightened, and she laughed breathily. "And remember. Around the villagers, we're not mates. We're...?"

"Boyfriend and girlfriend," he answered promptly. "Which makes no sense. Because friends don't do the things I want to do to you."

"Hiccup!" she blurted. Her scolding was silenced by a mouth crushing against hers.

* * *

><p>Astrid probably sustained more wounds from trying to sew shut a hole no bigger than her fingerprint than any battle she'd ever fought with a dragon. When she accidentally stabbed the needle into her forefinger for the sixth time, she swore so loudly that a hatchling resting near the cave startled and flew off in a panic.<p>

"Is that the kind of language yer teaching my son?" Valka's cool voice slid over her shoulder.

Astrid pressed her bleeding fingertip to her lips and looked warily up at the woman. Since her shirt was in her hands, in the process of being mended, she was only covered up top by her breast bindings and the bandages covering her healing wound. She refused to blush. Even as the woman's eyes roamed over various scars, lean muscle, the faint

lines of ribs exposed by years of barely enough food to get by. Let her see what a life on Berk made of the children it bore.

Valka sat across from her, leaning against the other side of the cave mouth. The sunshine fell prettily on her features, and for a second, Astrid had a vision of her- younger and happy and living contently on the island of Hiccup's birth. It was only the laugh lines by her eyes and the grey near her temples that gave away her age. She carried a wide basket under her arm, and when she set it down, various Nadder spines clattered against each other inside.

"He's a Viking," Astrid grumbled around the tip of her finger, glaring at the offending needle. "He could stand to expand his repertoire of unsavory remarks."

Hiccup's mother didn't reply to that. She gave her sewing project a scrutinizing gaze before glancing back to the basket. She picked up one of the sharp spears and held it up for her to see. "If you're going ta fly a Nadder, you're going ta need ta be able ta draw the poison out of her spines."

She had Astrid's attention. The blonde straightened, rolling the stiffness out of her shoulder as she watched Valka's fingers curl around the projectile. Was this some sort of attempt at peace? Or merely a necessary tutorial? Hiccup was off hunting with Toothless, and he'd left with a clear growl towards his mother to behave. Their relationship would never cease to baffle her.

"There are concentric circular layers inside of her spines," Valka began, flipping it to show her the wider base. "See here?" She could- it spiraled not unlike a tree's inner rings. "As the spine grows, it pushes through a film of poison beneath the Nadder's skin. So every new layer gets a new coat of poison."

Astrid nodded to show she understood.

Valka flipped the spine right-side up again. "Until yeh get the poison out, these are still very dangerous. Yeh have ta be extremely careful." Giving the tip a wide berth, she nudged the basket to the side and set down the little weapon on the stone floor in front of her. Then she began to roll it with the heels of her palms like Astrid's own mother often did with dough. "Watch the point- this crushes the layers inside, works the poison."

Valka picked up the spine and held it out to Astrid. "Here. You do it."

She was instantly struck with memories of the first few weeks after her handsal. When her mother had been on a warpath, trying to make her into a proper wife. She'd demonstrate everything from embroidering to dicing tubers to candlemaking- then she'd hand everything over to Astrid and say, "Here. Try."

Her mother gave up on that after a while. After she realized that her daughter was more likely to tangle a knot in her threads than sew them into any kind of lovely picture. Or that she'd never be able to break her of the axe-grip she held on the kitchen knives. But Valka watched her with the same level expression, holding out the deadly spine with the same casualty with which her mother would pass her torn leggings.

She felt, somehow, like that should mean something.

Astrid accepted the spine, moving to set down her shirt. Valka took the garment, chasing the sewing needle as it tried to slip free from the fabric. Though she set her gaze in front of her, being cautious not to nick her palm on the poisonous tip as she attempted to recreate the other woman's movements, she couldn't help but glance out of the corner of her eye. Confident hands made quick work of the ripped shoulder. Her fingers were long and slender, her knuckles red and cracked from rough use.

"How do I know when it's done?" Astrid asked, clearing her throat and trying to divert her attention from the woman's hands. Rolling the spine wasn't difficult work, but it felt awkward trying to imitate the same practiced grace Valka seemed to possess.

"Squeeze it," she replied, making a pinching motion with her thumb and forefingers.

She did so, the pressure aggravating her already abused fingertips.

"It should feel a little soft. Not mushy, but have some give." Valka reached over and tested the spine herself. "Mm. Aye. Like that."

Astrid held the spine a little tighter, noting that it felt like carrots that'd been left in the ground too long.

Hiccup's mother took the projectile from her, reaching in the basket and handing her a new one to replace it. "I'll have him show yeh how to weave the netting to hang them," she informed the blonde. Placing the spine between her teeth, she knotted off Astrid's shirt and broke the thread. Then she set the needle aside and tossed the garment back to its owner.

Standing, Valka removed the poisonous weapon from her mouth, standing and crossing the room to what looked like a fine mesh stretched between two large stones. There was a shallow bowl resting beneath to catch the run-off Astrid guessed. And she seemed to be correct in her assumption. Valka slid the spine point-down through one of the holes in the net. She gave it a flick, and after a moment, a clear drop of poison welled at the spine's tip.

Astrid inspected the one in her grasp for just a second before rolling it against the hard stone. She could hear the rustle of Valka's clothing as the woman came back to the window and took her seat again. For a while, the two worked Nadder spines together in silence, both content to stick to their own quiet thoughts. It didn't take long for Astrid's hands to start to ache, for her palms to turn red and tender. When she slowed and her left arm tired, her movements got clumsy. But even if Valka noticed that her son's mate couldn't keep up with her own quick and easy movements, she didn't say anything.

"They'll need ta drain for at least a day," she eventually spoke up, not pausing as she rolled two spines simultaneously. "Then yeh should lay them in the sun until they harden again. They make good impromptu weapons if yeh find yerself without one. The smaller ones can be used

as needles. The larger ones as stakes." With a shrug, she adds, "Tried them once as arrowheads. Not very successfully... Don't leave them near little boys who like breaking things apart to figure out how they work."

Astrid massaged her sore fingers with her thumb and felt her mouth tighten. She used the pause in her work to inspect the mended rip in her shirt and pull it over her head. There was only the pull of healing skin at her shoulder to remind her of the wound there. After tucking the hem into the waistband of her skirt, she gathered up the softened spines and pushed off the ground. She knelt by the mesh and began sticking them next to the first one.

"I love him, you know," she swallowed as she slipped each spine through a tiny hole in the netting. Brave as she liked to think she was, she couldn't turn and look at Valka as she said it. "I know you do. But I do too."

His mother didn't answer. The rattling sound of her working the spines against the stone stretched on uninterrupted for almost a full minute.

Astrid stood, though she kept her back to the woman. "The chief is a miserable man. And I think if you really thought you were blameless, you would go back with us to meet him." Her fingers moved to the back of her neck, gently pressing against the claim there. "You stopped believing in him. I'm not going to do that to Hiccup."

"I hope not." Valka's voice was smooth, even. "And I hope yeh don't disappoint him the way my husband disappointed me."

She glanced over her shoulder. "I've been disappointing him from the very first time we met." Her mother would lash her three different shades of red if she heard the way Astrid was speaking unchecked. "The difference is, he believed in me too."

* * *

><p>The taste of burned rabbit had a way of staining her tongue so that the fresh vegetables Valka had prepared as a side seemed charred too. Hiccup had told her the first night his mother came home that cooking wasn't her expertise. That they usually hunted and ate independently instead of having meals together. It was easy to see why. She and Valka must have shared a glaring lack of talent in the kitchen.<p>

She didn't comment on it, though. She inconspicuously scraped off the blackened parts and chewed behind a dainty hand so that she could hide a grimace if need be. Hiccup ate as if he hardly noticed, but then again, he'd been subjected to this his entire life.

"Tea, Astrid?" Valka asked as she poured water into three cups. Her question was innocent enough, but there was a clear stiffness in her tone that made her bite of rabbit go down hard. Another question hidden under the polite surface.

"Please," she answered formally. Heat threatened to warm her cheeks, but she kept her shoulders back and straight. She refused to acknowledge the way Hiccup's head had snapped up or meet his gaze.

He dropped the piece of meat he'd been holding onto the plate. "Is it for your shoulder?" he guessed, clearly exasperated with being out of the loop. His green eyes were a little accusing. "The Nadder poison?"

"No," Astrid muttered. Behind her, she could hear Valka digging through her little box of herbs.

"Then why can't I have it?" So far, she'd been able to successfully redirect his attentions whenever they strayed close to the topic of Moon Tea and its purpose. His curious nature wasn't having it, though. They would tackle the _what if_ conversation soon enough, but Astrid wanted it to wait until after everything had settled. She wasn't sure how long his impatience would hold out.

"Yeh can," Valka told him, just as the blonde was opening her mouth to grumble some other _just because _excuse. "Yeh won't like it, though."

That seemed to appease him for the moment. He frowned, but returned to his food, eating as if he didn't even taste it. He seemed to be of the mind that if he choked it down quick enough, he wouldn't have to taste it. Looking at his greasy fingers, she realized not for the first time that she'd have to get him used to eating with utensils. A faint memory of their conversation about table manners made the corner of her mouth tilt upwards as she watched him.

He looked up. Realized he was bent over his plate with his fingers half between his lips. Then he inspected her tidy posture, the way she'd torn her food into neat, bite-sized pieces. He gave her a sheepish grin, and she couldn't keep from returning it with a helpless smile. Something warm passed between them, and she heard the _I love you? _in his eyes as clearly as if he'd said it.

Valka set the cups down on the table, interrupting their quiet little moment. Hiccup went back to shoveling food in his mouth, and Astrid returned to her attempts at keeping her expression neutral. For a few minutes, they ate in uncomfortable silence. The fact that Hiccup and Astrid would be leaving come sunrise had been accepted with a hard nod, but his mother was still clearly unhappy about her son meeting his father. It was _unclear_, however, how much of that was personal and how much of that was his safety. It was like lying awake at night, wondering if the dragons would attack. That uneasy feeling that something devastating could be lingering on the horizon.

Hiccup cleared his throat. Both women looked up, though he kept his gaze on the stone table as he took a long draw from his cup. After setting it down, he fiddled with the wooden rim and said, "Mom- why don't you come with us?" His voice didn't carry a note of nervousness, but Astrid knew the courage it had taken him to ask the question. "Stoick will probably want to see you. And we could use your help in getting rid of the queen."

Valka didn't glance up from her plate. Her mouth was pursed and unhappy. "Listen to you," she snapped coldly. "_Getting rid _of it. You're already talking like one of them."

Shocked, Astrid flicked her eyes over to Hiccup. Hurt flashed across his features for a half second before irritation overtook it. "Yes.

Get rid of it. It's been the cause of the war for years."

"It's a queen," Valka said evenly. She ate with the same cool formality as Astrid, and the girl realized how odd it looked in this atmosphere. "It's not our place to interfere in another nest. It's the natural way of things."

Hiccup's sharp exhale was more of a noise of indignation than a sigh. His fingers curled tightly around his cup, as if it was anchoring him to the table. "It is our place if she's making the dragons fight and kill and do her dirty work! It's not natural for them to be aggressive. It's not natural for them to attack Berk."

"Another nest yeh don't belong to," she said under her breath.

Hiccup bristled. "I belong on Berk just as much as I belong here," he argued. "My father's there. I'm- I'm the heir. It's my birthplace and my mate's home. We have a responsibility to the Vikings, Mom." His hands gestured wildly and vaguely as he spoke. "We have the knowledge they need to make peace with the dragons. We can't just sit on it and watch them kill each other."

Valka took a controlled sip of water. "I'll no more interfere with another queen's nest than I would tell the Bewilderbeast where to make his." Her gaze landed on her son, firm and unyielding. "The dragons are older and more powerful than us, Hiccup. That's how it's been for centuries. We submit to the Alpha and he leads us."

"The Alpha protects," he hissed.

Astrid felt uncomfortable, watching them trade ideals that she'd never even considered. Ire boiled in her chest at Valka's words, but she didn't feel like it was her place to interrupt their argument. She clenched her jaw and watched sparks crackle between the two.

"I won't go to that island," his mother declared with icy finality. "In fact, when yeh meet Stoick, feel free to tell him I'm dead."

Scowling, Astrid watched Valka's angry expression as the woman pushed away from the table and stood. So this was what Hiccup meant when he said he thought his mother was afraid to return to Berk. Afraid to be judged, afraid to face her husband after living apart from him for almost twenty years. Astrid knew that was where her hostility stemmed from- not the thought of disturbing a queen's nest, but of being subjected to the derision of her old village. If she'd never fit in before, there was no chance of her feeling at home there now.

Hiccup glowered at her empty seat. Astrid reached over and brushed her fingertips across his forearm, and he gave her a ghost of a smile. It was gone as soon as it appeared, though. He watched his mother shifting around the makeshift kitchen with something like betrayal and longing.

Then two mugs of Moon tea were set in front of them. Valka could be a brilliant war strategist, what with her impressive methods of distraction. Sighing, Astrid immediately took the one closest to her and brought it to her lips. The bitter yet saccharine liquid was yet another offense to her tastebuds, but she took a long draw with

resignation.

Hiccup seemed torn between satisfying his curiosity and continuing his argument with his mother. She watched the indecision battling in his gaze for a long moment before he reached for the mug and gave it a sniff. His immediate cringe made her snort lightly into her own tea. Then he brought it to his lips and took a hesitant sip. Then another. He shuddered, making a choking noise as he wiped his tongue on his shirtsleeve.

Looking up at his mother to make sure she wasn't listening, he leaned in and whispered to Astrid, "Is it supposed to taste like that?"

"It's not supposed to be enjoyable," she assured him with a wry twist of her lips. Though she wouldn't put it past Valka to make it especially disgusting as a punishment of sorts for ruining her innocent son.

Hiccup set the mug back down on the tabletop, scooting it away from him like it might contain drops of Nadder poison. "Why do you drink it, then?"

"Uh." Astrid cut a glance over her shoulder to his mother. She was digging through her box of supplies, her back to the two and her movements sharp and irritated. Desperately wishing she could do this conversation at another time, another place, she self consciously brushed back her bangs. "It, um, keeps me from conceiving."

If the gods were merciful, that would be the end of it.

Of course, nothing quite went like she planned it where Hiccup was concerned.

"Conceiving what?" He eyed her mug suspiciously.

"A babe," Valka answered for her. Astrid winced as a narrow wooden box was placed next to her plate. "Don't let it run low," she warned.

When she gathered the nerve to look back at Hiccup, he was gaping at the little box. His hands, usually in a state of constant motion, had gone still on the tabletop. He cocked his head to the side as his mouth tried to form words. She could see the thought process happening behind his eyes, the connections being made.

"Yeh'll have ta stick together," Valka began, an incredibly welcome change of subject. Sitting back down at the table, she fixed Astrid in her calm gaze. "The consequences for treason are extreme in war times. They'll probably want yeh arrested until they get answers from Hiccup." To her son, she said, "She's better, but she won't be much use in a fight for a couple more days. Demand ta speak ta the chief, and don't let anyone near her until Stoick sees yeh."

Hiccup's stare was still stuck on the steaming mug in Astrid's hands. The shock had faded, though, giving way to a look of intense concentration. She laced her fingers around the mug as if she could hide it from his gaze with her hands.

"How well does that stuff work?" he asked, not shifting his

gaze.

"It's not foolproof," Valka answered tersely. "Are yeh listening, Hiccup? The Hooligans are not ta be taken lightly. They've likely only gotten crueller since my time there."

"We've got allies," Astrid interjected. "A few others who've seen the dragons' true nature. And no matter what, they're still my village. There's got to be some who'll be open-minded."

Valka's lips pressed into a thin line. She made no attempt to conceal her doubt. "I used ta tell myself that very same thing."

Astrid chewed at the inside of her cheek with frustration. She lifted the tea to her lips and tried to drown the defensive retorts on the tip of her tongue. When she lowered the mug again, Hiccup was watching her curiously. He was quiet, contemplative. She dropped her gaze and looked at her reflection in the yellow-green surface of her drink. Whatever it was he was seeing, she couldn't find it there.

* * *

><p>He came to her in the dark hours before sunrise, slipping into the bed and holding her close to his chest. She was dazed and heavy with sleep, but she sighed contentedly and let him stroke her hair and drop kisses on her face. His lips were light as butterfly wings, dusting across her eyelids, her cheeks, her nose and forehead. He hummed that song she'd heard him sing a couple of times and smoothed his hands up and down her back.<p>

Astrid wanted to stay awake. To savor the last few hours of peace they'd have before duty called them home to Berk. But his gentleness, his soothing presence- she was incapable of fighting the tide they called in. Sleep drew over her like a slow and gradual wave. Her fingers curled in his shirt and she drifted off with her forehead buried in the crook of his neck.

Then she awoke to hands shaking her. Someone calling her name with sharp alarm.

At first she thought she was at home, in her own bed. She thought that she'd slept through the raid horn and someone was jostling her to action. But then her eyes shot open and she realized that she was tangled in the furs of Hiccup's bed at the dragon sanctuary, not in her own room. She twisted into the hands, finding Valka's grim and unnerved face hovering above her.

"What's going on?" she asked, not a slurred syllable to show for her abrupt awakening. "What's wrong?"

The chief's lost wife glared down at her with frustration and distress. "Hiccup. Toothless." She tore the furs off of Astrid and pulled her from the bed. "They left you."

24. Chapter 24

Chapter Twenty-four.

She was lucky that Valka woke her when she did. The sun was just

barely cutting across the horizon, allowing the dimmest of light to glow through the icy dome of the dragon haven. She was lucky they'd prepared everything for their departure the night before- Valka had immediately noticed Hiccup's things missing from the pile by the bay windows. And she was lucky that Stormfly knew the way back to Berk. Lucky that she was willing to go back after all the abuse she'd been subjected to.

Because her mate was an idiot.

"Set me down over there," she whispered to her Nadder, shifting uncomfortably on Stormfly's back. Her legs were cramped, her hips and buttocks sore and aching from the hours of uninterrupted flight. Her hands were frozen and chafed where they held tightly onto Stormfly's horns. Astrid could tell the dragon was tired too- she'd lost her speed several hours in, and her breath was beginning to sound a little labored.

Berk was quiet under the nearly-set sun. The horn of alarm didn't blare when they drew close, which made Astrid think that the watchman had climbed down from his tower after seeing Hiccup and Toothless arrive. There were a couple of villagers wandering down pathways, though they scurried when they saw another dragon arriving. An eerie quiet skulked through the village like a fog. It set her teeth on edge, made the sound of Stormfly's talons crunching into the earth seem deafening.

"Hiccup?" she called out, though she didn't expect a reply. Jumping down from her Nadder's back, she adjusted the weapons Valka had tossed at her while Astrid was tugging on her boots. A sash loaded with Nadder spines. A long knife made of the same white material as the sickled tip of Hiccup's staff- bone?

Valka had pushed the knife's handle at her with gritted teeth and angry eyes. "Here." Her Stormcutter sensed his rider's agitation, tilting his head back and forth in compassionate curiosity. "I trust yeh know how to use this?"

She'd shown off a little, making the blade dance through her fingers before shoving it in her waistband. "Better than most," she muttered over her shoulder. Then she returned to fighting with her boot.

"If Stoick wants proof," the woman began, following Astrid's rushed scrambling through the tunnels. "Tell him about the dragon I made Hiccup. It- it was blue. It used to terrify him." Her voice was clipped and stressed, irritation with her son clear in her tone. "Or the colic that made Hiccup pull on his beard. Or the snow-"

"Come with us," she interrupted, stopping and turning on her heel. "Prove it that way. Tell Stoick yourself."

Her expression darkened from aggravation to barely withheld ire. "Remember. If he asks, yeh can tell him I'm dead."

Astrid shook her head, marveling at her stubbornness. Then, attaching the sash of spines around her bad shoulder, she'd turned back and whistled for Stormfly.

When nobody on Berk answered her call, she looked to the Nadder and gave her a hurried pat on the horn. "Stay out of sight," she

instructed her, a tremor of adrenaline in her voice. "I'll call for you. Okay?"

Stormfly gave a happy chirp. Stretching out her wings, she nudged into her rider's palm before taking off. Her shadow shrank along the thin grass until she was gone.

Astrid spun back towards the village and ran for her house. Some small part of her held out the hope that he'd be in her room, safe and waiting for her. She was disappointed, of course. Her house was empty, as was the chief's. Even the forge was deserted, the fire crackling and tools left resting on the anvil like somebody had left in a hurry. It was eerie, being home after spending a week away from it. Berk was impossibly unchanged, while she felt like a completely different person.

The skies were gray. The air was dry and cold.

Gritting her teeth, she ran past the kill ring, just barely glancing inside. Most of the cells were left open, and there was an enormous hole in the wire dome. With a sharp exhale of shock, Astrid wondered if that was damage Hiccup had wrought just a few hours ago or during their escape from the island. Either way, keeping dragons would be more difficult, with the roof compromised. That could be a good thing _or_ a very bad thing.

The doors to the Great Hall were cracked, and as she threw herself up the stairs leading to the hall, she experienced a strange series of flashbacks. It wasn't long ago that she'd been racing through the village for an entirely different reason. Trying to save the dragons from a bloody death. She was always one step behind, trying to catch up to everyone else before tragedy struck. Swearing under her breath, she promised herself she'd make Hiccup pay for this.

Shouting echoed from inside before she even slipped in the half-open doorway. She had to practically elbow in- seemingly the entire village had gathered in the hall, and tremors of angry conversation hummed over the crowd as she squeezed inside. But over the rumble of swearing Vikings and nervous whispers, one voice boomed over the rest. Stoick's.

"_Talk_, I said!"

Astrid felt a thrill of fear sizzle through her veins. Her efforts to find the center of the crowd became a little frantic. At the sound of skin cracking against skin, a silence snapped over the villagers, and she fumbled at her leather sash with shaking fingers.

"Where did you take the body?" the chief bellowed. "What are yeh planning?!"

The burly men in front of her parted just in time for Astrid to see Stoick's hand rise for another blow. Hiccup was on his knees, held by the front of his shirt, and he glared silently up at his father. His hands were bound behind him, and Toothless was nowhere in sight. Her heart broke.

A gasp rippled through the room when a Nadder spine stabbed into the floorboards by the chief's feet.

Thor dammit. She wasn't used to the light weight of the projectiles. Her throwing knives were much heavier. It threw her aim off.

"The next one goes in your hand!" she bluffed as the people standing near her backed away in disbelief. Murmurs of shock and a couple of screams filled the room. Astrid kept her eyes fixed on the chief, not willing to lose her focus. Her pulse raced audibly in her ears. The hand holding the readied spine trembled.

Everybody was watching her. They always watched her.

Stoick's arm went slack, and his widened eyes fell on her. His lips moved, as if trying to form words, but if he managed to speak any of them, they were drowned out by the mumble of the crowd.

Hiccup blinked up at first, then cut his gaze away. He pressed his mouth into a firm line, and with his face turned away from her, she could see the red swelling around his cheek and eye where he'd already been hit several times. His jaw clenched. He was embarrassed. Ashamed.

She opened her mouth to say something, but she was suddenly cut off by someone screaming her name. Astrid hardly had a moment to search out the voice before her mother tore into the center of the room and slammed into her. Warm arms wrapped tightly around her, and she could only stand in uncertain surprise as kisses were pressed across her face, her hair, her forehead. Something wet dripped in spatters against her bangs, and she realized that it was her mother's tears.

"Mom," she cringed, glancing anxiously over the woman's shoulder at the chief and his son. "It's okay. Not now."

The embrace, if anything, just grew tighter.

"It's him, isn't it?" her mother whispered into her ear. She smoothed a hand down Astrid's braid. "The one yeh were telling me about. Yeh awful girl."

Astrid took a deep breath and then gently dislodged her mother's grip. Stepping back, she frowned and put space between them so that she could turn back to the chief. Her mother tried to grab for her arm, but she pulled it away from her reaching hand. She readied the spine in reluctant threat once more.

"Traitor!" someone shouted.

"She's not dead?" someone else muttered in awe.

Stoick lowered the fist he'd raised, but he quickly regained his hostile expression. Behind his thick beard, his mouth was set in a dark scowl. "Astrid. How are yeh alive?"

She bounced a little nervously on the balls of her feet, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. Her eyes wanted to dart around the room, to search for anyone who might try and restrain her, but she forced herself to hold the chief's gaze. "Nadder poison isn't as incurable as we thought. I'll tell you all about it after you let him go."

Stoick glanced at Hiccup. Then he turned his glare back to Astrid. "Yer one of them, then," he spat. "I should've known. It was too odd to be coincidence!" He gave his son a rough shake.

"There's no 'them'," Astrid said slowly. "I'm on your side. And so is he- you just have to listen to-"

"Lies!"

She let the spine between her fingers fly. This one shot a little straighter than the first, since she was able to adjust for the lighter weight. It clipped past Stoick's calf, slicing through his pants before landing in the floor with a thwack. The chief winced but didn't release the boy's shirt.

Suddenly someone was grabbing her arm, and it wasn't her mother. The grip locked around her elbow was bruising, and she whipped her head around to hiss at her father. She started to reach for his wrist, to wrench herself free, but then there was another hand clamping down on her shoulder. Snotlout jerked her back, even as he watched her with eyes full of disbelief and chagrin.

That seemed to rile Hiccup into action. "Astrid!" he growled, attempting to surge to his feet, but Stoick shoved him back down to his knees. "Don't touch her!"

"So he speaks!" Stoick snarled, glowering down at the boy.

Hiccup snapped his teeth, as if to bite. Stoick drew back, but then narrowed his gaze and drew his axe from its holster at his back. Shoving the blade side to Hiccup's throat, he muttered a threat too low for her to hear over the collective noise.

The flash of iron made her heart lurch. She twisted, fighting against the hands holding her back. Snotlout's grip was looser, more hesitant than her father's painful vice. She'd have to break away from the right, if it came down to it.

"The chief is supposed to protect!" she hissed, thinking of the argument she'd heard between the dragon riders the night before. "How are your people supposed to trust you to protect the village when you'd murder your own-"

"Astrid!" Hiccup interrupted. He gave one quick shake of his head, and the action drove the axe a little deeper into the flesh of his throat. He winced.

She slowly bristled with angry realization. Her hands clenched into hard fists. "You haven't told him?" she shrieked. Again, she struggled against her restraints, but this time she wanted to strangle the boy she was trying to protect. "What are you waiting for? Tell him!"

There was a plea in his green eyes. The ones that so matched the man holding a death threat in his hand. His mouth thinned as he pressed his lips tight. But she wouldn't have it. She'd risk her life to stand up to Stoick the Vast, but she wouldn't risk his.

She stomped her foot, fixing him in an accusing glare. "Tell him! Or

I will!"

Stoick looked at her, heavy brows low and drawn together. "Explain yourself, Astrid! What's going on here?!"

She seethed, not tearing her gaze from Hiccup. Then she set her jaw and grit her teeth. "He's-"

"Wait." Hiccup stopped her again. He glanced away, towards the floor, and swallowed hard. The sight of his adam's apple bobbing against the sharp blade made her anxious. Behind his back, his wrists shifted uncomfortably in his bonds. For the first time since she'd entered, the Great Hall was silent. Or it would be, if it weren't for the deafening thud of her pulse racing in her ears.

I'm worried my dad will hate me, he'd told her.

"Well?" the chief bit out. "Don't make me cut it out of yeh."

The young man's sigh was sharp and tremulous. Hiccup looked up at Stoick, his eyes searching his face. Everything in Astrid's body tensed as he wet his lips and said, "I'm... My name's Hiccup Haddock..." He shook his head. The air was too thick to inhale. "I'm your son."

The room exploded. Shouts of confusion and protest flew out, and gasps rippled through the crowd like a storm. At her shoulder, she heard Snotlout whisper, "The _fuck_?" and for a second her father's hold on her elbow went slack. The next few seconds were chaos as villagers screamed for answers and Stoick stared down at Hiccup with wide eyes and parted lips. The bafflement was clear in his expression, the shock and pained doubt.

The axe lowered. It fell to the floor with a clatter, and then Stoick was taking Hiccup's face between his meaty hands. Nerves lit under her skin. The way he held Hiccup's head, he could snap the boy's neck before Astrid could even tear herself free.

"My son..." he breathed, examining Hiccup- for his wife's features? His own? "My son's- my son's dead."

"The dragons never hurt us," he stammered. "They kept us safe."

"How old are you?" Stoick asked, the question clipped and asked on a growl.

"Eighteen," Hiccup answered promptly. "This past winter."

There was a war in the chief's face. His breaths came in hard pants, his shoulders heaving with shuddering exhales. He shook his head, unable to believe it- to accept it. Stoick looked up and scanned the crowd, pausing on Gobber a few meters away before roaming again.

She lifted her chin but kept her mouth shut.

"Who told her about them?!" His bellow was furious as he scanned the crowd. His accusing stare fell on Gobber- her parents- Snotlout. "How did she find out?"

"_Hiccup_ told me!" she snapped. "Valka-" Almost biting her tongue

off, she cut herself off before she could give the chief's wife away. As many disagreements as she had with the woman, she was still grateful to Hiccup's mother. She still felt she owed her the last thing she'd requested. "Valka raised him with the dragons. He came to Berk to see the village- to see you."

"She's lying," a voice rumbled, and their gazes shifted to Spitelout, standing on the edge of the circle. "He's obviously some bastard she's dragged in to manipulate you, Stoick."

"And who would have the most to lose if I'm not?" she shot back. Her father gave her arm a jerk, jostling her injured shoulder. She flinched. Snot sucked in a breath. And Hiccup growled menacingly at her dad.

"Don't!" he barked, rising to the balls of his feet. "She's still healing!"

"I'm fine." She looked at Stoick. He watched the exchanges with a tight jaw and furrowed brows. His chest rose and fell as his eyes flicked from face to face with uncertainty. "Chief, this isn't some treasonous plot. I found him in the woods. Taking care of an injured Night Fury, trying to find out more about his dad..."

The Viking's frown was hard, the muscles of his arms twitching as he clenched his fists. His head lowered, agitated contemplation following the quick searching of his eyes as he absorbed her words. After a moment, he exhaled heavily- almost like the air had been slammed from his lungs- and stepped back on an unsteady foot. Then he steeled. Whirled on Hiccup.

"Yer coming with me," he snarled, taking the spindly boy by the upper arm and yanking him to his side. Then he stared straight past the crowd as he dragged his son towards the doors. Villagers stepped back without having to be told, making a path for the furious chief. "We'll find out for sure whether or not yer tellin' the truth."

Panicked green eyes found hers. Her mate dug in his heels, trying ineffectively to twist free. "Not without Astrid!" he demanded. White teeth flashed as he bared his teeth at Snotlout. "Last time I left her alone with Vikings, she nearly died."

She winced. It wasn't exactly the most convenient moment for him to express distrust, or for him to exclude himself from their people. "I'll be okay," she began to say, but then Stoick interrupted her.

"Fine. I've more than a few questions for her too." The chief searched for Gobber for a moment before jerking his chin at her. "Bring her."

A relieved little sigh escaped her when the blacksmith obeyed. The scowls traded between her mentor and her father were a conversation of their own, held without words and out of Astrid's translating abilities. The hard grip around her elbow released, only to be replaced by Gobber's calloused hand. Snot's hand dropped too. As the chief's second guided her away, someone tenderly brushed the side of her hair, but she was too slow to catch whose touch it was. Her mother tried to whisper something to her as she passed, but she

wasn't quick enough for that either.

The Great Hall doors were thrown open with a bang, shuddering in the chief's wake. He dragged the stumbling young man out into the evening air, while Gobber steered Astrid gently behind them. At first she was so focused on the spread of Hiccup's shoulders, the awkward stride he was attempting, that she didn't notice the frozen tufts falling in the firelight. But then they began to descend the front steps and something light and wet tickled her nose. Then her cheek.

The first snow of the year. Gobber must have had the same thought, because they looked to the dark sky in unison.

It was a short journey to the chief's house. What had once been the Haddock home before it simply became _Stoick's home_ was long gone, but it was always rebuilt on the same hilly spot above the rest of the village. Astrid had only been inside a handful of times that she could remember, usually running errands or passing along messages for her father. It was smaller than most of the village houses, especially considering his title. She was sure that it had been bigger once- until Stoick found no reason to rebuild the extra rooms.

Hiccup was thrown inside like a shucked fur after a long day. For a second, she thought he'd be able to catch himself, but he fell to his knees in the entrance of the chief's living room and grumbled something in his dragon language.

Astrid thought she was going to have to stand up to the chief for him. She was already taking deep breaths, preparing to snap at the man she was supposed to kneel to. But as soon as Gobber shut the front door behind them, she watched the unbearable weight of grief crush Stoick under its load. He leaned against the sitting chair by the firepit, fingers clenching the arched back with white knuckles. His shoulders fell, as did his expression. Flickering gold light made the white in his beard stand out. Dark shadows that simply appeared to be stress turned to exhaustion beneath his eyes. All at once he looked weary and old and sad.

"Tell me yer my son," he said, fixing the boy on the floor in a pleading gaze. His exhale shook. "Tell me about my wife."

Gobber let her arm go, and she wasted no time in moving to untie Hiccup's hands. He blinked up at Stoick in surprise, lips parted as if to form a question. It struck her that he'd never seen this side of the chief. He'd never shared a drink with the man after a raid, felt the loneliness that radiated from him in waves. As soon as she was able to untangle the knot at his wrists, he fell forward onto his fingertips, into his defensive crouch. The rope fell harmlessly between them.

"Mom?" was the first thing he said. His brow lifted suspiciously, but he rolled his spine in a gesture that was almost a shrug. "She's- Her name's Valka? She's from Berk?"

Astrid pushed back to her feet, taking a couple of steps back. "He wants to hear things only you could know," she informed him softly. She folded her arms over her chest and stood so that she could see both of the Viking men, in case either of them tried to grab Hiccup again. "He wants proof."

His eyes flicked to her for a second, and- after realizing he was the only one not standing- he slowly rose. His fingers flexed and tugged absently at his shirtsleeves. Hiccup shook his head. "She's, um. Tall. She has-"

The memory of their last dinner must have hit him.

"She _had... _brown hair. Green eyes, but... grayer. Not like mine."

There was a sudden breath hissed between Stoick's teeth. When Astrid looked at him, his features were twisted in a pained grimace. "'Had'. She's not... too?"

His gaze found hers again. At her little nod, his jaw clenched, and Hiccup sighed heavily. "No. She's not."

The chief swallowed audibly. To her left, Gobber gave a small sigh of his own. A pang of guilt that hadn't struck her before made her chest ache. It wasn't fair. She was suddenly much less inclined to keep Valka's secret.

Their reactions only lasted a second, though. Stoick shifted his weight on his feet. The floorboards creaked beneath the movement. "Continue."

Hiccup was obviously uncomfortable, being the center of attention. He rubbed the back of his neck and kept his line of sight low. "We were taken from Berk on a Stormcutter- we call him Cloudjumper. He's- he was her best friend. She taught me how to rescue dragons from snares and trappers." Licking his lips, he went on. "We didn't talk much about her life with the Vikings, but she mentioned Berk sometimes. She didn't think we'd be accepted if we came back. She was an outcast here."

Stoick's voice was rough. "Nothing Astrid couldn't have found out from one of the villagers or spun herself." Instead of the accusation that had been thick in his tone while they were in the Great Hall, there was almost a disappointment to his words. "Yeh'll have to try harder."

Astrid chewed at the inside of her cheek. She thought of the things Valka had given to her before she left- details. The blue dragon. The colic. She considered bringing up one of them, but bit down on that thought too. If it came to it.

Hiccup lifted his gaze. For a moment, she was reminded of his stubbornness. The way he'd refused to leave Toothless in the beginning. The way he'd stalked her relentlessly until she believed him. The way he'd watched her from the rooftops the night she'd sprained her wrist, keeping an eye on her despite her irritated protests. That was a Viking stubbornness in him. A trait that might just save him.

"She sang," he continued after clearing his throat. "Much better than me. She would dance too, sometimes, when I was little. She- when she laughed, she would touch her belly." Hiccup's hand slid to his own stomach, demonstrating the action, and Astrid realized that she hadn't seen his mother _really_ laugh while she'd been at the

nest.

She cut her eyes to the chief. There was a softening to his expression.

"She was a terrible cook. Always burned the fish, til we started eating it mostly raw."

Stoick's forehead creased with something that looked oddly like affection, with a tinge of bafflement. "Raw?"

Hiccup's faint smile was sheepish. "It's not so bad, really. Better than mom trying to actually cook."

Astrid's heart fluttered like a startled bird when the Viking suddenly split into a grin, and a chuckle shook his shoulders. The emotion making her chest tight was hard to identify at first, but then she realized that it had been hours since she could take a deep breath. Hope- it was hope she was starting to feel.

Stoick shook his head and sniffed. He glanced away from them for a minute, hands wringing so hard on the chair's back that she could hear the friction of his palms against the wood. When he looked back at Hiccup, his eyes were wet, and he blinked too often. "You look- you look a lot like him. Like I always pictured my Hiccup."

The young man's chest rose and fell with hard breaths. It grew hard to swallow while watching him- the unadulterated longing in his gaze, the question that she knew weighed on his mind. If his father was a good man. If his father ever missed him. She found her arms hugging herself.

Hiccup's hands fell to his sides as he finally discovered the truth he'd been searching for.

"You..." Her mate didn't look away anymore. He gave a dragony little bob. "You told her I was doomed with a name like that. That the trolls wouldn't take me even if you offered."

Stoick made a choking noise and dropped his head. "I hated it."

"But you made her name me anyways. Because I was sick, and she was scared."

The Viking's hands fell from the chair. He crossed the room in three large paces and crushed Hiccup to his chest. And for the first time in her life, Astrid watched her chief cry.

25. Chapter 25

I just want to take a quick minute to thank everyone who's read and reviewed WH in the past few months. The last chapter finally put this story over one thousand reviews, and that is a milestone that I never even imagined reaching in my wildest dreams (no pun intended). I never would have gotten this far if it wasn't for amazing readers who have continued to encourage me and build my confidence with incredibly sweet words. I hope that the last several chapters are as enjoyable as the first twenty-four have been.

****Chapter Twenty-Five.****

It took hours before her heartbeat finally settled into something resembling normalcy. While Stoick squeezed his son and spluttered question after question, Astrid sighed a heavy breath of relief and let herself fall into the Haddock's kitchen chair. The tumultuous twist of emotions that had been beating at her ribcage calmed, leaving her chest feeling sore and raw. But at least the panic of survival was gone.

"How- how is this possible?" The chief asked, almost to himself. He pulled Hiccup away from his chest, gripping his shoulders and looking him up and down like he was seeing the young man for the first time. "Where have you been all these years?"

Hiccup shrugged, breathing an uneasy laugh. "Home. Our nest."

"Nest." Stoick's unbearable grin only dimmed a fraction, though he said the word like it was a foreign taste on his tongue. "You- you really live with the dragons?"

He gave a sharp nod. "You have to understand. They're not what you think. We'll show you- Astrid and I- they can-"

"Alright. Aye, alright." The chief interrupted him, shaking his head. "We'll deal with it. I promise." Eyes glittering, he lifted one giant hand to curl his fingers around the back of his son's neck. "Together."

Gobber broke in then, sighing and announcing that he was going to fetch a barrel of mead. Nobody protested. It would be a long night of explanations, questions, catching up and tiptoeing about hard to swallow truths. So they began it with mugs of warmed drink, squeezed around the chief's tiny kitchen table. The fire crackled and popped at Astrid's back, and she tried to stay quiet as the discussion strayed from subject to subject.

"You've been here for months?" Stoick's incredulity was tinged with both suspicion and what sounded like a little hurt when Hiccup explained his collision with Toothless. "Where- How-"

"There's a cove in the woods," he began.

"A little east of Raven Point," she supplied. She didn't say anything more, because she still hadn't had a chance to ask about Toothless, and she didn't want to give up his location if he was in hiding.

Hiccup's hands wrapped around his mug, but they never seemed to stay still. They bounced and flexed and twisted as he told his story, as restless as his bouncing knee. He was the picture of barely contained energy.

"We were here not quite a week before Astrid found me."

The blonde in question stiffened as the gazes of two of the most important men in her village cut her way. She disguised her awkwardness with a sip of mead.

"I wasn't planning on staying. I was just coming to look. To... watch." Hiccup was watching the table now. "But Toothless changed everything. And Astrid figured out a way to fix his tail, but it took some time."

"The fin," Stoick grumbled, lifting a bushy brow. "It was made here?"

Hiccup bobbed his head in answer. "Fishlegs and I designed it. He built it in pieces, that way he and Astrid could get it out of the village without being noticed."

"Odin's hairy balls!" Gobber swore, banging his mug-hand on the tabletop. "_Tha's_ what that useless apprentice of mine always had on th' anvil?"

The corner of Hiccup's mouth leapt upwards as he looked to the blacksmith. "It's controlled by a pedal system. He can't fly without a rider who knows how to use it."

"And as of right now, that list is limited to Hiccup." Astrid rubbed her fingertips into a whorl in the table's wood. Perhaps by making the Night Fury seem like less of a threat, they could convince the Vikings that he truly wasn't one. But that also ran the risk of revealing his one vulnerability.

Stoick's mouth was a hard line, and she could almost hear the bones in his jaw creaking as he clenched it. It made her nervous, giving him anything that could be used against them- they were still of very opposing opinions where the dragons were concerned, and until she could be sure of the creatures' safety, he was still the enemy. Hiccup was trusting- too trusting. She had to be the one to hold onto doubt.

"So why not leave, then?" The chief asked, clearing his throat. "Once yer dragon was able to fly- why stay?"

The orange light of the fire couldn't hide the color that rose in Hiccup's cheeks. Green eyes lifted to glance at Astrid, and then suddenly her own face felt warm. "I... wasn't done yet." After a beat, he continued. "I knew about the raids. What the dragons were doing to Berk. They're not from our nest."

Stoick's shoulders visibly relaxed.

"Mom and I had this theory- a queen. An alpha that directs the lesser species through a sort of mind control." Hiccup had his elbows up on the table. "I wasn't sure- couldn't be sure without following the dragons back to their own nest. But I know they're not naturally hostile. And I couldn't sit by while my mother's home was dying."

Both of the older men nodded understandingly. The chief raised a hand to stroke his beard- though she wasn't sure if the action was more thoughtful or self conscious.

He wet his lips. "Did yeh- did yeh nae trust me enough ta tell me who yeh were?"

Hiccup immediately dropped his gaze, looking like a child caught

doing something naughty. He rubbed his palms over his thighs and sniffed. "Well, I actually- I didn't know..." Shrugging, he stole a glance toward Astrid again. "All I had to go on was my mom's stories. It took some time for us to figure it out."

Something seemed to spark in Gobber's eyes. "Tha's why yeh asked me about Valka, then?" His question was directed to her. "Yeh already knew who she was?"

"I knew she was part of the village." She nodded to the young man sitting across the table from her. "Hiccup told me that much. I knew she was a dragon sympathizer, and that Hiccup was a baby when they were taken. But that was about it." Scratching her nails into the wood, she shifted her legs beneath her before they fell asleep. "I didn't know she was Stoick's wife for a while."

"How did yeh find out?" The chief asked.

"Cloudjumper. Her dragon. I saw the way you reacted to it." And then a sense of having spoken too much made her mouth snap shut. She nearly bit her tongue trying to swallow back the words.

But it was too late. Stoick was already putting the pieces together. She watched his eyes widen, watched the pain flood his irises as he thought back to the night Valka had come to Berk. "She- my Val-" he rasped. "She was alive? She was here on Berk and I-?" Shoving away from the table, he took several heavy strides away until he was leaning with his hands against the hearth. "That was her. That was my _wife_, and I- I was so blind."

Astrid had one hand on the back of her chair, ready to stand. "Chief, you couldn't have known. They were in masks."

There were tears in his dark laugh. "My wife and my son. Back from Valhalla. And what do I do?" His voice dropped to a cold whisper. "I tried to kill them both."

"Stoick," Gobber sighed.

"If you knew it was us," Hiccup said quietly. His fingers curled into his palms. "What would you have done?"

The chief's back trembled as he shook his head. "Put down the weapons. Told my wife I loved her."

Hiccup's quick inhale probably went unnoticed by the blacksmith sitting between them, but Astrid knew where his thoughts were. She met his gaze, frowning as an unspoken understanding passed between them. They both knew that the chief's heart hadn't strayed from Valka. And it plagued them both that they were letting him believe she was dead.

"Why didn't she tell me?" Stoick broke into their quiet conversation. Turning, he let them see the wet streaks glimmering on his cheeks. Indignation seemed to have finally found him. "Why didn't she come back? Why did she _keep_ _you_ _from_ me?" With every new question, he seemed to break a little more.

Hiccup's features twisted with what she knew was a similar grief. "Berk was dangerous," he swallowed, as if it killed him to say it.

"And nobody listened to her. The raids- they didn't reach our nest. She thought I was safe."

Astrid chewed on the inside of her cheek. There was more to it than that. More than just her fear for Hiccup's safety. She tried to squash down the guilt that came with knowing the truth, but it kept rising to the surface. She raked her fingers through her bangs.

"She didn't trust the villagers anymore," Astrid admitted reluctantly. Giving Stoick an apologetic look, she lifted her face to the light. "She didn't think you would ever change your mind about dragons."

"That's no excuse!" Stoick snarled, but she could see the pain beneath his accusation. "Hiccup is mine! My son- my heir! She had no right!"

"I know," she agreed. "I can't say she was right. But you saw what happened in there." Lifting her arms, she gestured vaguely at the door leading to the village waiting outside. "They're calling him a traitor. And Stoick, you tried to kill me at the mere idea of making peace with the dragons."

"That was before I knew!" He stabbed a finger in their direction. "I thought my family was dead. If she'd come back- if she'd proved to me-"

"Yeh still might not have listened," Gobber suddenly interrupted. He frowned into his nearly empty mug-hand as the chief fixed him in a tearful glare. "Face it, Stoick. Yer as stubborn as they come. Valka was always a little... strange. Yeh knew it- I knew it. How many times did she throw herself in front of yer axe? How many nights did yeh spend arguin'?"

The chief growled a little. "Nothing I haven't told myself, Gobber."

"Then yeh know how the village watched her." The Viking sat straighter in his chair and gripped the edge of the table. "We watched her. Accused her. How was she supposed ta know she'd be accepted? That somebody would listen?"

"She should have known me!" Stoick roared, but his last word was lost to a crack in his voice. "She should have known what losing them did ta me!"

"It doesn't matter!" Hiccup stood, slicing a hand through the air. "We can't go back! We can't change it." The strain in his posture was obvious, the urge to slip into his dragon-like crouch clear. "What matters is now. We can save the village now. Humans and dragons are dying, and if it weren't for the years Mom and I spent with the dragons, we never would have been able to help them."

The chief's chest rose and fell with heavy breaths, and he nodded. Looking at the floor, he wiped his face on his forearm. "Aye. I'm sorry."

With his apology, Hiccup seemed to soften too. They looked so alike when their expressions mirrored one another so cleanly. He used the hand that had so sharply put an end to Stoick's ranting to anxiously

rub his neck. "I'm sorry too. I wanted- I wanted to find you. I wanted to know you. Mom kept you a secret because she worried, but..." His little glance up was tentative. "I understand how you feel."

The chief stared at his son for a long time, the room silent save for the popping of logs in the fire. Lost years seemed to span between them- opportunities missed, moments stolen and impossible to recover. But there was a new bond forming. Astrid knew she couldn't understand it and maybe never would, but she watched it growing between them. Two pieces of a broken family trying to be put back together.

After a while, Stoick nodded. He crossed back to the table and took his seat once more. Hiccup slowly lowered back into his chair, and Stoick held his mug out to Gobber to be refilled.

"So," he said. "Yeh had a theory."

Hiccup's mouth curled into a faint smile as he watched his father's face.

* * *

><p>It was late when Gobber walked her home. There were a few Vikings lurking outside the chief's house, either trying to eavesdrop or simply wait out the conversation that left them all emotionally drained. They hadn't discussed it all- thankfully they'd hardly even scratched the surface of what she and Hiccup were to each other- but after hours of questions on both Hiccup and Stoick's parts, they'd decided to break for the night. When she and her mentor stepped past the front steps, villagers immediately pressed inwards.<p>

"What's happening in there?" Someone asked in hushed tones, reaching for Gobber's elbow.

"Is he really the chief's son?" Someone else whispered.

"Back, yeh vultures!" Gobber growled at the few Vikings digging for information. He waved them away, keeping one arm held protectively around Astrid's back to lead her away from the house. "Leave the man alone and go ta bed!"

People watched her as they passed, some trying to make eye contact with her, but she kept her expression neutral and her eyes down. It was unclear who was friend or foe anymore, and it was too dangerous to assume anyone was on her side as of yet. It was the only reason she'd accepted Gobber's offer to escort her home.

She was blissfully relieved to see that neither of the Jorgensons were in sight.

"No matter what happens," Gobber told her at her front door, "Yeh did the right thing helping that lad."

She couldn't help but throw her arms around him. The Viking stiffened, obviously uncomfortable at the display of affection, but her whole chest felt like it might burst. It just felt so good to finally hear someone approve of her actions. To hear someone say she'd done well. The hiding, the planning, the risks they'd taken- she'd taken- someone else thought it was worth it. That meant

everything to her.

"I know," she replied, giving his broad shoulders another squeeze before stepping back. "Thank you."

Gobber's helmet shifted as he scratched at the back of his head. If she wasn't mistaken, his cheeks looked a little pink. "Right. Well. Don't go around the village alone just yet. Odds are Stoick'll call a council meeting in the morning to discuss everything."

Astrid nodded, suddenly wondering what had happened to her axe. When did she have it last? The day she and Hiccup left Berk? No. The night they flew to the dragon's nest? She hoped he passed the same warning along to Hiccup, but it would probably be unnecessary. Stoick likely wouldn't let him out of his sight for the next several days.

They said their goodbyes, and then she took a deep breath before turning to her front door. She'd noticed in the firelight back at the chief's house that the pale skin of her inner elbow had become smudged with bruises from her father's grip. There was no telling what awaited her inside her own home. She might find herself sleeping with her dragon tonight.

Astrid steeled her jaw. Straightened her shoulders. Then she reached for the handle and pushed the door open. It wasn't locked. That was an encouragement.

Her parents were seated at the family table when she entered, her mother leaning into her father with her hand on his shoulder. Their heads lifted at the sound of her entrance. Astrid kept her frown, resolved not to be the first to say something, but then her mother was standing so quickly that her chair fell back and clattered behind her.

Just like in the Great Hall, she was gathered in strong, warm arms that squeezed her almost uncomfortably tight. Her mother's sigh shook into her hair, and she pressed her cheek to the top of her head.

"Oh, my girl," she whispered. It was a strange, quiet kind of embrace, and Astrid felt something thick knotting in her throat. "My sweet girl." Her mother's chest rose and fell against hers, breaths deep and trembling.

"You waited for me?" she asked, looking up despite not being able to see the woman's face. "It's late."

"We have questions," her father grumbled.

She and her mother both cut their gazes aside to look at him.

"But they can wait." Her mom's voice was a little hard. Gentle fingers smoothed over her braid, as soothing as they were when she was a little girl with her arms wrapped around her mother's waist. "We just wanted to make sure you were alright. That there wouldn't be any... repercussions." When she pulled away to examine her daughter's face, there was anxiety twisting in her blue eyes.

Astrid shook her head, lifting a shoulder uncertainly. "I don't know yet. There'll be a council meeting tomorrow." After a thought, she

added, "But he is Stoick's son, Mom. This isn't a con."

"Where have you been hiding that boy?" her father demanded, brows set in a hard furrow. He still hadn't risen from his place at the table, that same spot where he'd argued with her about the search, where he'd told her she'd dishonored him. "And for how long?"

She started to answer with a half truth, to tell him about the cove but certainly not about the nights Hiccup had spent in her bed. But her mother interrupted her before she could get the words out.

"Stop it," she hissed, her grip clenching just a little on Astrid's arm. Then to Astrid, she softened and said, "Go on upstairs. We'll talk about it in the morning."

Her gaze shifted between her parents for a second. Then, nodding uneasily, she gave her mother a kiss on the cheek and started the stairs to her room. When she quietly shut herself behind her door, she could hear the harsh snap of her parents' argument below.

"She's been keepin' secrets! We have nae idea what kind of trouble she's been getting into behind our backs- behind the whole village's back!"

"What does it matter? She's alive! Does that mean nothing to yeh? Yer daughter's alive."

"Of course it does! But it doesn't change the fact that she's been lying. What she's been doing with the dragons is treason. It's dishon-"

"Dishonorable? How can yeh think of yer honor now? We thought she was dead. I thought I was never going ta see her again!"

"Don't twist this! I'm just as relieved ta see her alive, but it can't excuse her actions! Our family-"

"Has already been broken enough for yer pride! Yeh drove off your own brother- I won't let you send our daughter away too!"

Astrid stepped away from the door, closing her eyes as if to block out the sound. An overwhelming weariness seeped into her bones, making her limbs heavy and her shoulders sag. The day had been long-starting with Valka shaking her awake, the terrifying flight to Berk, then revealing Hiccup to the chief. She wasn't sure which exhaustion was stronger: the physical lack of energy or her emotional fatigue. With barely functioning hands, she tugged off her clothes and slipped into her nightgown. It had been folded neatly and set on her bed. Then she crawled underneath the blankets and was asleep before her parents shouting melted into silence.

* * *

><p>She was so deep in her dreamless rest that she didn't hear Hiccup slipping in the window. Neither did she hear his soft footsteps padding towards her bed, or the whisper of her name as he knelt down to her level. The nuzzle of his forehead against hers, though- that pulled her out of the tides of sleep. Her eyes fluttered open to find his staring warmly at her.<p>

No words were spoken for a moment. She pushed away from her pillow and threw her arms around him, sighing into his neck as his hands snaked around her waist.

He was there. He was warm. He was safe and loved and in her embrace. His heart thrummed solidly against her breast, and she sighed at the perfect comfort of his nearness.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered, pulling away just enough to be able to see his face in the dark. "What about Stoick? Did he not let you stay?"

"He did," Hiccup shook his head, one corner of his mouth tilting sheepishly upwards. "But. He snores pretty loud. And it felt weird being in his house." She shivered as his knuckles trailed up her spine. "It's not home. You're home."

Her chest warmed. Pushing his bangs out of his eyes, she sighed with content and allowed herself a helpless smile. Getting him accustomed to human rules was going to be impossible. She was going to have to be much firmer in the future about him sneaking into her room. They'd gone through too much to be separated by his blatant risk-taking now.

Which reminded her.

"Ow!"

Hiccup's sharp yelp of pain was likely louder than safe, but she didn't regret the blow she landed against his arm.

"That's for leaving me, you asshole." She folded her arms in front of her. "What were you thinking? Why would you go without me?"

His mouth pursed in a petulant little pout. He cut his gaze to the floorboards. "If they were going to arrest me, I wanted you to be safe." His hands slid to her hips, and he lowered his head to her lap like a sulking dragon. "You're my mate. It's my duty to protect you."

Astrid snorted. "What about me? You're my mate. That means it's my job to protect you too. I can't do that if you leave me on an island in the middle of nowhere with your mom."

Hiccup twisted so his face was buried in her thighs and sighed heavily. What a child. Still, she let her arms drop and smoothed her hands over his hair. He squeezed her hips, thumbs scratching circles into her sides. Then after a moment, he mumbled something unintelligible.

"What?" she asked, stopping her motions as if that might somehow help her hear better.

His groan was muffled against her lap, but it sounded faintly exasperated. Then he lifted his head. His eyes didn't rise to her face. "We... are mates now. So... Even if you drink that gross tea, there's going to be the possibility of hatch- No-" He stopped himself, hands held out as he amended his statement. "Babies. The possibility of babies."

Astrid felt her head spin as all of the blood in her body tried to rush to her face. "That's- that's true, but-"

He interrupted her, grimacing as he tried to spit the rest of his words out. "You're my mate. For life. And that means that I have to take responsibility for you and anyone that might grow inside you. I can't- can't just live for myself anymore. I have to look out for you. For the family I want to have with you."

"Hiccup..." she sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose.

He stiffened visibly, hands tightening at her hips. "Did- do you not want that? With me?"

His question was rewarded with another punch. "Of course I do," she muttered, cheeks warm. Her fingertips found the bruise peeking out from the collar of his shirt and gently pressed at the discoloration. "I wouldn't have given you this if I didn't want you- and everything that comes with you."

The relief that poured out of him was tangible. He almost melted at her bedside.

"But that doesn't mean you can treat me like some fragile little housewife," she continued, her voice firm. "You don't get to leave me behind when it comes to stuff like this. I'm a woman, yes, but I am more than capable of taking care of myself. And any tiny humans that come along." Lifting her brows, she tilted his chin up so he was forced to look at her. "Let me look out for you too. Let me cover my front, and you can watch my back."

Hiccup nodded, turning his head to kiss the inside of her palm.

"Further," she added. "If you ever pull anything like that, I will personally end your life."

The smirk he hid against the heel of her hand was crooked. "Doesn't that sort of defeat the purpose?"

Astrid gave his braid a soft tug. "I'm serious, wild man. We face stuff together from now on."

He nodded again. "Got it."

And then there was a noise that made her spine go rigid and her blood freeze in her veins. Her bedroom door clicked, and her hand leapt from his cheek as she sucked a sharp breath through her teeth.

Her mother's face appeared in the doorway. She had her robe pulled around her shoulders, her fingers curled around the doorknob. Her expression didn't reveal any shock or anger- if anything, she only seemed curious. Her eyes landed on the boy knelt next to her daughter's bed.

"Hiccup," she said quietly. It made Astrid wonder if her father still slept.

The young man in question quickly rose to his feet. After shooting Astrid a quick glance of uncertainty, he bowed his head to her

mother. "Astrid's mom," he blurted, hands clasping behind his back like a child caught stealing sweets before dinner. "I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep. Don't be mad at Astrid."

"Mrs. Hofferson," her mother corrected, tone a little perplexed as she evaluated the chief's son.

"He grew up with dragons. He's still learning Viking culture," Astrid explained, her own voice sounding surprisingly calm despite the way her heart was racing. She'd already told her mother how she felt about him, and she wasn't exactly livid when she thought Astrid was sleeping with Snotlout. Where two weeks ago she would have thrown herself on a sword to keep from having this conversation, after hearing her mother fighting for her, something felt... easier.

"I'm sorry," Hiccup said again. "Mrs. Hofferson."

Her mother's nod was slow, the narrowing of her eyes speculative instead of angry. After a long moment of tense silence, she wrapped her arms around herself. "I'll be honest, I was waiting to see if yeh would show up."

Astrid's stomach lurched. "Why?"

Even though her daughter was the one to speak, the older woman kept her gaze fixed on Hiccup as she said, "Last time he left you with Vikings, you nearly died." She recalled his words from the conflict in the Great Hall. "You're very protective of her, aren't yeh?"

"You have no idea," she muttered, thinking of the conversation they'd finished just in time.

Hiccup just gave her a nod. "She's my- my girlfriend."

Her mother's features softened, and Astrid felt her heart give a flutter that had nothing to do with the thrill of being caught. "Aye? Well, yeh can't be in a young woman's room alone." There was a gentle scolding to her response, but not the expected sharpness of a woman catching a man in her daughter's room after dark.

"I understand," Hiccup told her. "Astrid told me. I didn't listen."

There was a beat of silence, and then her mother opened the door a little wider. "Come on, then. I'll make yeh a pallet by the hearth."

All the air in Astrid's lungs seemed to escape in one relieved exhale. This time she was the one scrambling to gather her mother in a tight and teary hug.

26. Chapter 26

Chapter Twenty-Six.

Stoick was at her kitchen table when she came downstairs. Her first reaction was confusion. Then after noticing the chief's son at his side and the glare her father was shooting him over a steaming mug, perplexity quickly shifted to defensive wariness.

It was an odd sight. Her mother was bustling around the kitchen, cleaning this and that and making overly cheerful conversation with Stoick. The chief answered with tight, polite replies. The sight of the enormous Viking sitting at their humble table was almost humorous, as was seeing the reed of a boy next to him. From behind, they couldn't have looked more opposite. But the weirdest part was her father's silence. Though he and the chief weren't close friends, they'd always been able to make conversation in the past. The Hofferson patriarch was clearly deciding to bite his tongue for the moment.

"Chief?" she said by way of announcing herself, furrowing her brow as she descended the stairs. "What are you doing here so early?"

Four pairs of eyes turned her way. She didn't miss how Hiccup's face lit up, and her chest warmed with instant affection. That was quickly quenched by her father's clenched jaw.

"He came looking for Hiccup," her dad answered, while her mother said, "The council is gathering."

Astrid stopped at the bottom of the stairs and folded her arms in front of her. "Chief?"

Stoick stood. "Both," he told her, his expression neutral. "We'll be meeting shortly after morning duties. It's safer for me to escort yeh."

She nodded. It didn't slip her notice that there was no food at the table to offer the chief. She was sure the missing hospitality plagued her mother. Frowning, she resolved to start her search for work as soon as possible. There was no telling how much of this winter her family would survive without the Jorgensons' aid. The thought made her chest clench with guilt. For now, though, she would have to keep her focus on ensuring Hiccup's safety.

"I want Fishlegs and the twins there," she informed Stoick, aware that her tone eked towards demanding. "They can decide for themselves whether or not they speak up, but I want them there."

"Aye," he accepted. "We'll arrange it."

"How many exactly have yeh gotten involved in this plot of yers?" her father growled, setting his mug down with no small measure of force. "First it's you and this boy. Now it's yer whole little group. Is there anything else yeh haven't told us?"

Astrid's lips pressed into a hard frown.

This isn't the first time Hiccup's slept over. In fact, this isn't the most scandalous thing we've done in the past twenty-four hours. He and I spent the last week in his mother's haven playing with dragons and having sex. Oh? Valka? I didn't mention she's still alive?

But she didn't say any of that. Instead, she tried not to grind her teeth as she replied, "You haven't given me much of a reason to trust you with information."

Her father shot to his feet, but Astrid kept her chin level.

"Calder!" Stoick barked over her mother's cry of protest. "Restrain yourself!"

Though she didn't break her stare, she watched Hiccup shift in his seat, ready to come to her aid if she needed it. His jaw was tight. "Why are you so angry?" he accused her father. "She's trying to protect your village."

She loosened her balled fists to give him a subtle cue to relax. Tension crackled between Astrid and her father, and her heart pounded against her ribcage. "It's okay, Hiccup. This isn't about the dragons." Narrowing her gaze, she shook her head. "It's about me breaking our contract with the Jorgensons."

"But you don't want to marry him," the young man argued, standing. "_I_ don't want you to marry him." Stoick put a hand on his son's shoulder, pulling him back from the conversation.

"An obedient daughter would do it anyways," she bit out.

Her father's shoulders rose and fell with heavy, furious breaths. His nostrils flared. "This is not the way we raised yeh. Irresponsible, selfish, rash... We raised you-"

"Like livestock," she interrupted. "To follow the other sheep, to be oblivious. To accept and obey until the day you could sell me off for the highest price."

"That's not true!" her mother interjected.

She didn't snap back. After seeing her mother's relief, and after what she'd done for her and Hiccup, Astrid didn't want to fight with her. Not when things seemed to finally be on the mend. So a cold silence fell over the room, and she tore her gaze away from her father's face. She could feel the color in her cheeks, the ire warming her skin. The chief's presence only made her frustration sharper.

Wetting her lips, she adjusted her axe at her back and crossed the room, towards the front door. "If you're ready, Chief, I am."

She met Hiccup's stare as his father made eye contact with hers. He looked as disgruntled as she felt, held beneath the gentle restraint of Stoick's hand. Her hand itched to reach for him, to stay close together. And for the first time she experienced the aggravation of watching eyes driving a barrier between them.

"Aye." The chief stepped away from the table, expression uncomfortable as he tipped his helmet towards her mother. "We'll be going then."

"We'll be there," her mother assured her quietly. "We'll be there to support yeh."

"It'll be okay" Astrid glanced over her shoulder at her father as Stoick opened the front door. Eyes dark as a storm stared back. "I haven't done anything wrong."

* * *

><p>Her bravado disappeared the moment she sat between Hiccup and Phlegma the Fierce at the council table. Stoick sat at the head, the place of honor, with his son on his right and Gobber on his left. The Jorgensons were seated next to the blacksmith so that Astrid faced Spitelout straight on, and she could feel the weight of Snotlout's gaze.<p>

And his wasn't the only one. The long table was full for this discussion, and every elder she'd ever looked up to her entire life was watching her. Near the end, the twins and Fishlegs kept sending her uneasy glances. Eventually her parents joined them, but there was no way of knowing if they were allies or just witnesses to a trial. Her heart felt like a wild thing in her chest, fluttering up to her throat no matter how many times she tried to swallow it down.

Hiccup obviously noticed her anxiety. Between curious examinations of every person who entered the Great Hall, he watched her with confusion and concern. Stoick kept leaning over to mumble something in his ear, but whatever he said only seemed to make Hiccup frown. He shifted and twitched restlessly, sniffing conspicuously whenever someone passed too close. Had he always looked this way? Like a wild thing hiding amongst humans? It seemed obvious to her now, like his dragon-esque traits were glaringly apparent.

When the table was full, Stoick looked to her with an expression that maybe tried to be comforting but missed the mark. He then stood, banging his fist against the tabletop. The quiet mumble of chatter and gossip hushed. Over a dozen pairs of eyes turned his way.

"I know yeh have questions," he began in a deep, booming voice. "I still have some for myself."

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Hiccup rub his clean-shaved jaw self-consciously.

"But in the middle of a war- after eighteen years- the gods have seen fit ta return something lost ta me." Stoick held out a hand and gestured to his right. "After a thorough examination, Gobber and I both have come ta believe this young man and his story. And so I'd like ta present my son, born ta me by my late wife: Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III."

The table exploded with questions, gasps, comments and protests. Some posed their statements to Stoick, though they were drowned out by noise, while others merely spoke to their neighbors in quiet or outraged tones. Astrid felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, and she swallowed down the stone in her throat. When she dared a glance at Spitelout, he had Hiccup fixed in a scrutinizing glare.

"Pipe down, yeh noisy bastards!" Gobber pounded his mug hand in an attempt to gain some order. Mead sloshed out and splattered messily in front of him. "Yeh'll not get any answers actin' like a bucket full'a fools!"

It didn't put an immediate end to the clamor, but the council slowly settled back into some semblance of quiet. Stoick waited stone-faced

until he had everyone's full attention, commanding order without even speaking. It was a method she'd observed him utilizing before, when she studied him with the intention of becoming a chief's wife someday. Silence in a loud room went a long way.

The chief shifted his weight on his feet. Took a step to the side so that he could rest a giant hand on Hiccup's shoulder. "Yeh all know my wife was not like the rest of us. She was... odd. A dragon sympathizer."

Astrid expected some harsh comment to go up here, but it would seem that not even in their confusion and ire did anyone have the nerve to criticize the chief's dead wife. She was surprised at the respectful silence they gave him.

"When Valka and Hiccup were taken by a dragon just a few months after Hiccup's birth, they were not killed as we'd previously believed." Stoick's gaze swept the table. "Valka raised my son with the dragons. She brought him up at their nest as one of their own."

People did speak up at this. Though it wasn't nearly the commotion of before, the council obviously didn't like the idea of a human living among dragons.

"And you trust him, Stoick?"

"He's been attacking Berk with the dragons!"

"Yeh're deluded!"

He cut their comments down with a sharp hand gesture. "Hiccup is not aligned with the dragons that raid our island. As Gobber and I understand it, his nest is ta the north. The beasts that attack Berk come from a nest to the west."

"How can yeh be sure?" Someone further down the table asked.

"Because I've been to both," Astrid interjected. She couldn't see who exactly had posed the question, but she looked down several seats towards the direction of the voice. "Hiccup and I followed the dragons from the last raid back to their nest. Then when I was injured last week, Hiccup took me up north so he could give me an antidote." She was very careful not to say his nest or his home. The way things stood, she didn't need to give anybody another reason to incriminate her. Not with the Jorgensons staring at her from across the table.

"And what part did yeh play in all this, Miss Hofferson?" One of the elders cleared his throat. The noise itself sounded skeptical. "Yeh seem to be very knowledgeable about this young man. More than anyone else."

Luckily, she didn't have to speak. As head of the council, Stoick was quick to step in and take on the explanations. "Astrid found Hiccup in the woods approximately three months ago," the chief answered. "The two have relayed their meeting ta me, and I'm satisfied with how it was handled. She kept Hiccup safe and out of sight until they could acquire enough proof ta bring ta the council."

"All due respect," Spitelout finally spoke up, straightening his shoulders. "But yer only satisfied because this boy turned out not ta be a threat. Or so he says. A matter of luck."

The change in atmosphere couldn't have been clearer. As if his words were brought in on a cold front, a chill went down Astrid's spine.

"State yer meaning," Stoick demanded with a scowl.

The chief's brother sat forward, leaning his forearms on the tabletop. "If he'd turned out ta be anyone but yer son, this would be treason. This man- yer son, he says- is a stranger. But the Hofferson girl has been a part of this island since she was born. And she knowingly concealed a potential enemy; she exposed village secrets; left men, women, and children open ta attacks. Not ta mention she lied ta everyone. Outcomes aside, how can yeh not see that as a betrayal to Berk?"

Astrid's heart raced. The air in the room thinned as a murmur of agreement rose. She felt eyes shifting from the chief and Hiccup to _her_.

"I've had nothing but Berk's best interests in mind the entire time," she asserted, hoping she sounded more confident than she suddenly felt. "Before I trusted him, I was very careful with our interactions." Splaying her fingers flat on the wood in front of her, she spoke as clearly as possible. She didn't want a single tremor slipping free. "Hiccup offered a way to free Berk from the dragon raids. And we can accomplish that. But if I'd turned him in from the beginning- when I wanted to- _he_ would have been killed without ever knowing who his father was, and _we_ would be subject to attacks for centuries more."

"Berk's best interests," Spitelout repeated, raising a brow. His mouth twisted into a sneer. "Yeh'd have us believe that for three months yeh hid this boy, conspired with him, lied for him- for nobody's interests but the greater good?"

Some of the older council members coughed at that, passed whispers between each other. Astrid's eyes flicked down the table to see several accusing expressions. She jumped when something brushed her hand- Hiccup's fingertips hovering over her knuckles. Giving him a tiny shake of her head, she clenched her fingers into fists and drew them close to herself. Snotlout was watching the little interaction when she looked up.

She wet her lips, nervous. "Hiccup proved himself to be an ally. He's unusual, and I didn't believe his stories about the dragons at first, but he convinced me. And if he convinced me, he can convince all of you too."

"That's not the point, Astrid." It was Snotlout this time. Her spine straightened as the man she'd once been sentenced to marry called her out. "How can Berk trust you when you kept this from everybody?"

"Everybody?" she scoffed. "Or kept it from _you_?"

"Either," he shot back, lifting his chin a fraction. "Everybody."

Including your fiance."

"You're not her fiance," Hiccup hissed, and chaos broke out.

The blood in Astrid's veins ran cold. She straightened, eyes widening as news of the broken engagement hit the council like a tidal wave. It crashed down the two rows of seats, raising questions and exclamations of disbelief. She watched with dread as her mother's hand locked onto her father's above the table.

"The wedding is supposed ta take place next week!" someone insisted.

"When did this happen?" another spluttered. "Did yeh agree ta this, Spitelout?"

"Calder! What's going on?!"

Even the chief looked surprised, though the only sign of it was the slight rise of his brows. She knew he suspected that his son's attachment to her was more than just fondness- especially after he came to her in the dead of night- but they hadn't had the opportunity to explain it entirely. The only ones who really knew were at the far end of the table. Fishlegs. Ruffnut. Perhaps even her mother.

"Another shining example of yer duplicity," Spitelout said over the cacaphony. "We have a contract, girl. Or have yeh broken that?"

Astrid wanted to vomit. Her stomach twisted and roiled with nausea. The noise fell to silence. A collective stare of heavy accusation settled on her face.

"How dare yeh question such a thing!" a voice suddenly screeched. Her mom. "My daughter's virtue is not up for discussion."

"Her virtue or lack thereof is the difference between a villager loyal ta her tribe and a woman loyal ta her lover." Spitelout's words dripped with malice. "How are we ta know whether or not anything she says is true if she's covering for this boy?"

"Tread lightly," Stoick snarled at his brother. His eyes flashed with a threat. "Remember what boy yeh speak of."

"Yer 'son,'" Spitelout replied, his emphasis making it clear he doubted everything he'd heard. "What makes yeh so sure he's who he says he is, Stoick? Because he knows some stories that Astrid's fed him? Or because yeh want to believe that he's telling the truth?"

"And what makes you think you know better than he does?" Hiccup's voice was sharp with acid. "You're supposed to be family, so where have you been? Too busy trying to turn everyone against Astrid to introduce yourself?"

Gobber broke between the two. "Bickering is nae going ta help," he said, holding his hands out between Hiccup and his uncle. "Let's get back ta the matter at hand."

"Aye, let's." Spitelout pushed his chair back, as if he was preparing to stand. "I demand to know the nature of yer relationship with this boy."

"I don't owe you anything," Astrid spat.

"I have a legally binding contract that says otherwise."

"And just what do yeh suggest, Jorgenson?" Gobber frowned behind his mustache, giving the man at his side a level look. "Bring in the healer? Invite half the village ta find out whether or not her virtue's intact? Yer determined not ta believe the girl no matter what she says."

Eyes the color of dirty ice cut to her, evaluated her stiff posture. They jumped to Hiccup and the protective way he leaned towards her. And then back to her own furious gaze. "Aye. Call the elder. If she hasn't broken our contract, I'll concede."

The color was high in Astrid's cheeks. She knew her face was bright red, that her lips were pressed into a hard, unyielding line. She hated him. She hated Spitelout Jorgenson with every fiber of her being. Never in her life had she experienced a humiliation quite like this, having her private life torn away from her and gutted like a wild animal. Tears of frustration stung her lashes, but she clenched her fists in her lap and refused to let them fall.

"You can't do that!" she heard her mother protesting, but the sounds of arguing were starting to fade. She hadn't had the physical proof of purity for years, though she hadn't lost it through any sexual deviancy. Even if she hadn't mated with Hiccup, there would be no evidence to tell them otherwise. Astrid's own breaths were beginning to sound like hollow wheezings in her chest. Her heartbeat thudded in her ears.

They were going to rip her apart. They were going to lay all her sins bare for the entire village to see.

She felt Hiccup looking at her with concern. He twisted in his seat and leaned close. "I don't understand," he whispered, a note of panic in his tone. "What are they talking about?"

"That's bullshit!" A protest went up from the other end of the table.

Astrid's head snapped up. Over the line of horned Viking helmets, she saw two blonde braids swing forward. Ruffnut stood and rested her palms on the tabletop. "This meeting wasn't called for a bunch of creepy old men to stand around speculating about whether or not Astrid's been sleeping around! For Thor's sake, her maidenhead broke in a raid accident three years back!" She pointed a sharp finger at one of the elders who had been giving her a harsh reproach. "Rescuing your bratty grandkids, Mobsnort!"

"Convenient," Spitelout seethed.

For a second, Astrid wasn't sure what emotion was making her heart pound so painfully: mortification or gratitude.

"Ruffnut," the chief said, clearing his throat. He didn't sound too

upset about her outburst, though. "Yer a guest at the council table."

"I was trying ta tell yeh the same thing," Astrid's mother told Stoick. "It'll be in Gothi's records. You've already persecuted, attacked, and humiliated my daughter. Now yeh shame her and our entire family by even entertaining this conversation?"

"Yeh don't think it's pertinent?" Spitelout snapped.

"To a meeting about dragons?" Ruffnut shot back. "I let a Zippleback eat a fish right out of my hand- if you think she has to be a virgin to be loyal to Berk, then you might as well let Gothi check between my legs too!"

"And mine!" Tuffnut added, standing. Then he gave a little tilt of his head. "Y'know. Metaphorically speaking." His twin rolled her eyes, but then she tilted towards him. He tapped his helmet against hers.

The council members who'd been arguing against her were blushing. What inappropriate table conversation, and how like Ruffnut to not care at all.

"Me too." Across from them, Fishlegs ambled to his feet. His cheeks were bright pink, but he was attempting a very convincing mask of challenge. "I was the first person she told. I made the Night Fury's tail. I could have come forward at any time and I didn't. I'm just as guilty as Astrid."

The girl in question bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep the tears blurring her vision back. Things with Fishlegs had been shaky at best since he interfered with her and Snotlout. She'd lost trust in him. But seeing him stand up for her now warmed him to her. She realized she'd made the right choice in picking her allies.

We'll be there, her mother had said. We'll be there to support yeh.

Support was an amenity she hadn't let herself believe she'd find.

"So we're agreed," her father rumbled, speaking up for the first time. "My daughter's relationship with Stoick's son is not a relevant topic for this meeting."

For a painful beat of silence, he and Spitelout glowered at each other. Astrid held her breath.

Beneath the table, gentle fingers wrapped around her own. This time she didn't pull her hand away. She let Hiccup's assuaging warmth enfold her, even if it was just that little piece of her. It would be useless to pretend like she wasn't trembling- with embarrassment, with rage- so she took the small bit of comfort he offered.

"We're agreed," the chief finally announced, putting an end to the deviation. His eyes skimmed over the pair at his right side, and she could see the flash of relief that just barely flickered in their depths. Curious. "Now. As I was saying, I've been told that there's two nests. Hiccup's nest and tha hostile nest at Helheim's

Gate."

The council settled once more, the tension from their argument still rattling in the air. But they kept their whispering and commenting to themselves while Stoick continued to outline the current situation with the queen's nest. Everyone sat with stony expressions at first, but once he began to explain that Hiccup was going to aid in eradicating the monster that lived in the volcano, they seemed to thaw just slightly. The chief ensured them that more meetings would follow. That they- Hiccup and Astrid included- would work out a plan of attack.

"Until then," he began, raising a brow of warning to the group gathered at the table. "I'm placing a village-wide ban on dragon killing."

That had the council members up in arms again. They shouted at him and made wide, angry gestures.

"What if there's a raid?" One asked, stabbing a thumb towards the large double doors of the Great Hall. "What if they attack? Are we supposed to just sit on our asses?"

"Yeh do what yeh have to ta protect yerself," Stoick answered shortly. "Nothing more. I'm not a fan of the idea myself, but this is one of the conditions we've been given for Hiccup's aid."

"If he's yer son, he shouldn't need conditions," Spitelout hissed hatefully.

That riled her mate. He sat forward. "I've risked more than my life to help you Vikings, and I'm willing to do it again," Hiccup barked. "But if you think for a minute that I'll sit back while you continue to murder my kind, you're wrong."

This time it was her turn to give his hand a squeeze.

Stoick held out his palm, as if to call him off. "Easy." To the table, he said, "If yeh see a dragon on Berk, yer under no circumstances t' attack first. Notify me or Gobber. There's two dragons in particular that you'll be seeing 'round the island. A blue Nadder- easily spooked. Astrid says she can reverse their poison, but if I find out yeh instigated things, I'll let yeh die." His grave expression didn't belie any thread of humor. "Secondly. A Night Fury."

Hiccup shocked her by whistling shrilly through his teeth. There was a moment of commotion as everyone questioned the strange noise. Then one- two- three- heartbeats passed, and the doors of the Great Hall exploded. A snarling dragon the color of night bounded over tables and bared his sharp teeth.

Over the shouts of panic, Hiccup chirped, "Berk, Toothless. Toothless, Berk."

* * *

><p>"He's... docile." Astrid's mother seemed to choose her words very carefully. Even though she'd chosen the seat farthest from the dragon (and consequently, the young man scratching the dragon's belly), her

expression spoke of her distaste rather than fear.<p>

"He's a big giant hatchling," Hiccup laughed with a grin. The Night Fury currently taking up the majority of the Hoffersons' living room was decidedly not hatchling sized, but the simpering noises he made when petted could've fooled Astrid. When Hiccup found his sweet spot, Toothless kicked his leg in twitchy flails of pleasure. "Aren't you, big baby boo?"

"I can't believe you hid a Night Fury on Berk for three months," Tuffnut spluttered for the hundredth time. He shook his head and held his hand out towards the kicking paw. The claws at the end of each toe could easily slice through his palm, but the teen obviously enjoyed testing his reflexes.

"I can't believe you hid a Night Fury and a human being for three months," Ruffnut countered. She seemed more interested in Toothless' gums, trying to figure out the mystery of his retractable teeth.

"It required a lot of strategy," Fishlegs replied, a note of pride in his tone. "I'm surprised people didn't catch on sooner."

Astrid watched the scene from the last step, her knees pulled to her chest and her smile buried against her forearms. There was nothing really to be happy about. The council still stared at her with suspicion. The Jorgensons still hated her. The dragons were no more accepted than they were that morning. But after an emotionally exhausting day of retelling her story over and over again, she was satisfied with sitting in front of the fire with her family and friends. All present. All safe. For a moment, everything was calm.

"Did you see their faces when Toothless busted in?" one of the twins cackled. "Odin's eyeball, I thought they all peed their pants!"

The corner of Hiccup's mouth pulled upwards. "Sorry. I thought a grand entrance might dissuade people from trying anything."

"It was awesome!"

"I nearly peed my pants!"

Astrid felt a warmth growing in her chest, just watching Hiccup interacting with the other teens. To think- if he'd grown up here on Berk, these would be his friends. They accepted the chief's son without a speck of hesitation. As soon as the council meeting was dissolved for afternoon duties, they were crowding him and asking him question after question.

It was a little humorous, if she was honest. At first the boy's eyes had gone wide, like a forest animal cornered in the woods. Then once he realized that the twins were friendly, he gave them the goofiest grin she'd ever seen in her life.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut adored his feralness. They couldn't get over the way he walked, the way he completely ignored personal space, the way he curled around Astrid like a protective pet. They thought everything he did was hilarious and charming. Fishlegs was already used to the wild young man, but he was excited too. He basked in the praise from the twins and Gobber as they inspected Toothless' saddle

and tested the tailfin rig.

Astrid's eyes floated to her parents. Her mom had her chair pushed back into the kitchen, where she watched the dragon from afar. She'd been wary about letting the creature into her house, but after some coaxing, they got her to concede. Her father didn't say much on the topic, just glared from the other side of the kitchen table. His arms were folded over his chest, and he kept his eyes on Toothless like the Night Fury might suddenly turn from a loving kitten to a ferocious mountain lion. But at least he wasn't arguing. He wasn't accusing or fighting.

She rested her cheek against her kneecaps and sighed with content. It'd been a long time since she'd felt any kind of solidarity with her family or her village. A long time since she'd felt at peace.

A knock at the front door interrupted Hiccup's explanation of a Night Fury's saliva and its healing properties.

Astrid quickly rose to her feet, gesturing for her parents to stay seated. It'd been a long day for them too, and her high spirits kept her buoyed and light. She pushed her bangs away from her forehead and gave Hiccup a fond glance over her shoulder before opening the door.

"Hey, chief." She smiled at the burly Viking standing in the doorway. "Hiccup's inside. It's a little cramped, but come on in."

He didn't speak. After a long, heavy moment of silence, Astrid noticed the deep creases in his brow. His frown was etched into his face like stone, and there was something like despair darkening his eyes. Behind him, snow fell quietly through the night sky.

"Chief?" The tenuous worry in her voice cut through the room, putting an end to the teens' cheerful conversation. Behind her, she heard one of her parents rise from their chair.

Stoick shook his head, parting his lips and taking a shaking breath. Guilt hung around him like a storm cloud. "I'm sorry, Astrid."

Now Hiccup was shifting, rising into a cautious crouch. Toothless flipped to his feet.

She felt like her lungs were compressing. Like there was suddenly no oxygen to pull from the air. Her heart thudded audibly, her body frozen. She dropped her gaze to the parchment folded in the chief's hand. "What's that?"

Stoick swallowed. The apology he didn't say cut deeper than the one he worded. His fist tightened around the paper. "I have a warrant for yer arrest."

27. Chapter 27

****Chapter Twenty-Seven.****

Several things happened at once.

At her chief's words, all the oxygen in the room seemed to go thin.

Astrid's heart lurched, then slammed heavily in her ribcage.

"Arrest?" Fishlegs blurted, and the sound of chairs scraping behind her made her jump. "What for?"

A warm arm snaked around her waist and pulled her away from the doorway. She smelled Hiccup and felt his chest at her back.

"It's the council," Stoick told her, shaking his head. His gaze shifted over her shoulder, to her parents. "Spitelout got ta them after the meeting. Convinced them I'm biased and blind. He's demanding yeh be removed from the situation."

"He can't do that!" Ruffnut argued.

Her mother demanded, "What are the charges?"

She felt like she was watching everything happening from someplace outside her body. Her limbs felt numb, her voice stuck in her throat. Her lungs worked to draw in breaths, inhaling and exhaling like that simple repetition was all her mind could stand to manage. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

Stoick lifted the half-crumpled piece of parchment in his hand. From behind her, her mother reached out and snatched the warrant from his grasp. Astrid shifted against Hiccup's protective grip to watch her unfold the paper. It trembled in her hands.

"Conspiracy, harboring a potential enemy... _misappropriating _resources?" Her mother waved the warrant at him. "Stoick, these are hardly worth an arrest. _Most _of it is speculation and overreaction!"

"I know," the chief swallowed, nodding. "I know. My brother has me backed into a corner." After wetting his lips nervously, he looked back to Astrid. "He said he'd settle for these charges, for a few months of prison until Hiccup proves himself able to take out the nest-"

"That's bullshit!" Tuffnut shouted.

Breathe in, breathe out.

"Or-" Stoick flicked his gaze to his son, his expression bleak and apologetic. "He'll have her thrown in jail for breaking her contract. Effective until the Hoffersons pay back what they owe, with interest."

Hiccup's arm tightened around her. "This- this is ridiculous. If she doesn't want to marry Snotlout, she shouldn't have to! He can't just do this!"

"He _can._" Astrid craned her neck to look back at him, lowering her voice to a whisper. "It's what I told you might happen. It's always been a possibility." Her heart still pounded painfully in her chest, now twisting with dread and resignation. She'd been hoping- _believing_- that things would all work out, but just believing that people would do the right thing didn't mean that they would.

Green eyes lit with frustration and fury stared down at her. His jaw was tight, his brow knit in indignation. He didn't understand- couldn't understand how Viking politics worked. Especially when the chief became personally involved. The law was both rigidly enforced and thrown to the wind in a way that would only confuse a boy raised free from society.

"I'm sorry, son." Stoick's expression told her it hurt him even more than he said to have to do this. Stepping across the threshold, he gently took Astrid's elbow in his giant hand.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Hiccup's arm was a hard bar across her stomach. He wrapped his fingers around her shoulder, pulling her back. "No. No, you can't take her."

There was too much resolve in his tone. The Night Fury behind them, who'd almost gone unnoticed while her arrest was unfolding, suddenly snarled and shoved his way to Hiccup's side. Seeing Stoick's hold on her, Toothless glared and hissed lowly. His throat warbled with the threat of a plasma blast, and alarm ran the length of Astrid's spine.

"Toothless, no!" she yelped, holding her hand out to stop him. She gave Hiccup an imploring glance. "We can't use the dragons like that. It's exactly what Spitelout wants- to make an enemy of them."

He bared his teeth back at her in a weak growl. His fingers knotted in her shirt. "We can't just let them take you."

"Yes. You have to." She tried pulling away from him, but he held firm. "Work everything out with the council. Kill the queen. Free the dragons. I'll be fine." With a shaking exhale, she moved for his wrist and tried breaking the hold on her waist. Her other hand reached out and rested on Stoick's forearm.

"Astrid, no!" Her mother's panicked whimper sounded behind her. She felt someone touch her braid.

"Stop," Hiccup pleaded with her, even as she stepped away from his grasp. His hand tightened on her arm. "Don't go with him."

"I don't have a _choice_," she replied, her throat starting to feel thick.

"Astrid!" he barked, grief weighing down his voice. A dragon trying to stop his mate. The other teens were starting to shout too, trying to relay messages to her, trying to stop her before she stepped over the threshold. Her mother was crying again, having to say yet another goodbye. It was difficult, shaking Hiccup off of her arm, but she had to. He kept grabbing for her- her elbow, her hand, her sleeve. He looked desperately to the chief. "Stoick, please! Please, you can't take her. _Dad_!"

Even as she watched the word hit Stoick like an arrow, he steeled his jaw and pulled her to his side. His eyes cut to the ground, unable to meet his son's. He wasn't rough, didn't hold her bruisingly the way Hiccup almost did. Snow and ice crunched beneath her boots as she stumbled outside, and cold air immediately licked at her bare hands

and exposed neck.

"It's just for a little while," she tried to assure him with an unsteady smile. She looked to her parents next to him. Her mother's hands were clamped over her mouth, and her father was stony and silent. The twins and Fishlegs crowded around Toothless, trying to squeeze past. "I'll be fine. Take care of Stormfly for me."

The noise drew the neighbors' attention. Other Berkians peeked out windows, sticking their heads out their doors. She told herself that it was good- let them see that Stoick wasn't playing favorites, and that some strange sort of justice was being carried out for her deceit. They would use Spitelout's vengeance against him, make the village realize that they only wanted what was best for everyone. She just hoped her parents would be okay. That the other teens would help Hiccup take on the role of a leader. That he would stay safe.

A new voice suddenly bit into the night air.

"Stoick. Let go of my daughter."

The chief's hand loosened almost reflexively as her father stepped past his wife. His jaw was clenched, his light eyes cold. Astrid's mother reached for him, grabbing the sleeve of his tunic, but her father shook her off without a glance back.

"I can't, Calder. You know that." Stoick's apologetic answer was quiet, spoken between two friends. "I don't want ta do this. But it'll give yeh and yer wife more time ta-"

"Spitelout made a contract with _me_. Not Astrid." Ice crackled in his tone. "And I'm the one who told him after the meeting that we wouldn't be upholding it."

"Dad?" she murmured, just as her mom cried, "What?"

He pretended not to hear them, reaching between her and Stoick and breaking them apart. "I broke the contract. So I'm the one yeh'll be taking ta prison." Something passed between the two men as they stared silently at each other, and Astrid found her father's hand gently pushing her back inside. Tension sizzled hotly despite the cold air. Their solemn frowns matched.

"Aye," Stoick said then, taking her father by the upper arm. "Come with me."

"Dad, no!" Astrid shrieked, suddenly panicked. She lunged for the two Vikings, latching onto her father's shoulder guards, but her mother and Hiccup both grabbed her. "Don't! This is my fault! Take me!"

"It's okay," Hiccup whispered, "it's okay. Down, Toothless." Hot tears stung her eyes. Her mate tugged her back, ignoring the claws she dug into his forearm. She would've twisted the arm reaching around her front and broken the hand on her wrist if one of them wasn't her mother's. In her state, she couldn't tell what belonged to who.

"Dad!" she screamed, not caring if the whole village heard. "Stoick, _please_! It's me he's mad at!"

Her mother's breath was warm at her ear. "Let him, Astrid, please let him." She smoothed back her daughter's bangs despite the girl's struggling.

"Hiccup." Her father's eyes settled on the young man restraining her. He ignored his daughter. "Yeh'll do what yeh have ta. Understand?"

The hand on her waist dug into her flesh- not uncomfortably, but hard enough to let her know he wouldn't release her. She growled her frustration and tried jerking against it, but he held her hard against his chest. She felt his head nod against her temple.

"Hiccup, let me go," she begged quietly. She whipped around to look at him. "You don't understand, he brings in the income. The money. If he's not here, we'll never come up with the interest. He'll die in prison before we can pay the Jorgensons back."

He wet his lips, shaking his head. "If he knows that and he's going anyways... I'm not gonna stop him. We'll get him out, Astrid, I promise. We'll work out a plan."

"Hiccup-" Her dad's voice again. Why did he choose now to be pals with her mate? Where was this when she came down for breakfast? When the council was staring in accusation? "Shut the door."

"No!" She whirled back, reaching for her father's hand, his shirt, anything. But her mother pulled her back by the belt. Hiccup moved in front of her, using his foot to kick the door closed. It slammed shut hard enough to make the doorframe rattle.

"You asshole!"

She wasn't sure if she was shouting at Hiccup or Stoick or Spitelout or her father. Astrid beat her fists at the door and the shoulder blocking her access to it. The tears that she blinked back were closer to anger and frustration than anything, her desperation making her livid.

New hands grabbed her. She felt herself being tugged back, tripping over her own feet. Ruffnut grunted when she threw her elbow back, but didn't let go. "Get it together, Astrid! It happened! It's done! Let them go!"

Ruffnut wasn't Hiccup, and she certainly wasn't her mother. Turning her head, she bit down hard on the finger closest to her shoulder. When her restraints loosened in surprise, Astrid ducked, dislodging the girl's hands and snatching her wrists. Ruff yelped when her arm was twisted back into a painful hold. Astrid pushed her back towards her twin and turned on her heel. The two stumbled backwards from the force.

Her boots thudded on the steps leading to her room. With hardly a pause, she stole her axe from its spot on the bed and stormed back down to the main floor.

"What are you doing?" Fishlegs asked nervously when he saw the weapon in her hand. People were suddenly less keen on trying to grab her.

Smart.

"I'm going to see the Jorgensons," she hissed through her teeth. Her hand flexed and clenched on the wooden handle of her axe. There was a little groove where her thumbnail had dug a notch over the years of holding it too tightly. It settled there now.

Hiccup moved in front of the door again. His expression was calm and smooth, only marred by the faint tension in his brow. Holding out his hands as if in defense, he tried speaking in a voice just as soothing. "Don't. It's just like you said, violence won't fix this." When he took a step forward to touch her, she stepped back. "He wants an enemy, remember? He wants to make us into the bad guys."

More hot tears escaped. She scraped them away with the base of her palm. "I'm not going to hurt Spitelout," she snapped. Narrowing her gaze, she nodded at the door behind her mate. "I'm going to tell him I'll marry his asshole son."

It probably would've been less effective to cut Hiccup down with the axe. His chest deflated as he breathed a sharp exhale, and the look in his eyes was pained. Fishlegs blurted something she didn't hear, and her mother gasped her name, but she didn't look at them. She looked at him. Both of their shoulders heaving with adrenaline and betrayal, they held each other's stare. Hiccup's knees bent, just a fraction, and then he lowered himself to his hands and feet and crawled out of her way. When he turned his face away from her, he was scowling.

"I'll be back later," she whispered to her mother. When she tried to reach for her daughter's elbow, she snatched it close. "You should've let them take me."

Ruffnut was saying something when she slammed the door shut behind her. Astrid thought about going after Stoick and her father, about storming the jail cells, but the small bit of reason she had left reminded her it'd do no good. Flakes of frost tangled in her hair and landed on her hot cheeks. Her rage burned so hot, she was surprised they didn't hiss when they touched her skin.

There were still a few stragglers standing outside whispering to each other about what had just transpired in front of her house. She glared at them and lifted her chin, and most scurried back to their own homes. Her breath billowed in front of her as she sighed her irritation. Clenching her fists, she stalked towards the Jorgensons' place. Either they'd be there, or at the prison, waiting with smug expressions to see her locked behind bars.

She felt like one of the dragons she'd seen at Valka's sanctuary. A Snafflefang with injured wings, ruined by traps. Unable to fly, confined to the earth. Trapped. Like Gobber always said, a downed dragon was a dead dragon. But she could still breathe fire.

The walk to the Jorgensons' felt like the last taste of freedom she'd ever had. It was the last time she'd belong to nobody but herself, the last time she would be completely autonomous. The cold wedged deep beneath her clothing, under her skin and inside her bones. It felt like a little death. A little like prison. She'd rather give her life than submit it to somebody else's will, but her family's lives- her father's- she'd subject herself for that.

Astrid banged on the front door, shouting Snotlout's name and causing a ruckus. Let their neighbors peek out and see what was going on. After a few moments, the door was jerked open, and Snot stood in front of her with wide eyes.

"Thor's hammer, Astrid, what are you doing?"

She frowned. Until that very moment, she hadn't realized how much she'd missed Snotlout. Not the man who pressured her into marriage and was as thick-skulled as a Gronkle. But the friend who she could trust to have her back during a raid. The person who breathed cracking apologies after she'd been hit by Stormfly's poison dart. She missed having him as an ally. As much as she loathed his father for the way he interfered in her life, she couldn't make herself hate Snotlout.

"If I marry you," she began, voice shaking with a myriad of emotions. "Will you and your dad lift the charges on me and mine?"

"What are you talking about? What do you mean about your dad?"

Astrid raked her bangs out of her eyes, huffing and blinking up to the sky before shifting her gaze back to him. "Stoick arrested him for breaking my contract. Can I fix it? If I say I'll marry you, will you get him out of prison?"

He didn't answer immediately. Snotlout stared, stunned, rubbing his stubbled chin. Then he furrowed his brow at her. "You're with the dragon rider, aren't you? The guy who's supposed to be my cousin?" It wasn't a question. It was an accusation, as if he was daring her to correct him.

She felt her chin dimple, her mouth pursing with repressed hopelessness. She pictured the wounded look in her mate's eyes when she'd told him where she was headed. Her heart ached.

"His name's Hiccup," she said quietly. "He is your cousin."

"And you're fucking him?" He raised his brows, tongue smoothing over the front of his teeth. While crossing his arms in front of his chest, he seemed to take up the entire doorway with his broad shoulders. He filled a door the way his father filled a room, leaving no space for anyone else.

Her fingers fluttered on the handle of her axe. She swallowed but didn't glance down. Taking a step forward, she lifted a nervous hand and rested it on his forearm. "Look. Snot." Astrid wet her lips, shaking her head. "I'm not going to sell myself to you. I'm not a commodity to trade. But if you have my dad released, if you leave my family alone, I'll marry you." Unable to meet his gaze, she looked over his shoulder, into the shadows of his house. "I'll try. Just like you want. I can't promise I'll ever feel the way you do, but I'll try."

His arm twitched under her fingertips- she could feel the warm muscles and the soft black hairs, and they were both so foreign after memorizing the slender shape of Hiccup's arms. Her insides squirmed to touch him so familiarly, but if this was what she had to

do to keep her father from dying in a prison cell, she'd do it.

Snotlout searched her face. "That's all I ever wanted... then that guy shows up, and everything I ever wanted, he has."

"He gave me a _choice_," she whispered. "That's all _I_ ever wanted."

"And now?" Blue eyes narrowed, difficult to see in the dark. "Now it's him or your dad? And I'm the second-choice?"

Astrid gritted her teeth, anger simmering in her belly. "I'm not the one who made it that way."

"It wasn't _me_, Astrid! I didn't do all those things behind the village's back. I didn't put Berk in danger. I didn't hook up with somebody else behind _your_ back." He threw his hands up, dislodging her tentative touch. "I'm not the reason you're here. I never was."

"Are you saying no?" she asked, impatience making her words clipped. "Is that your answer?"

Snotlout hardened his jaw. He took her face in his hands, the flesh of his palms warm and strangely soft against her cheeks. "I want to give you a choice. I'm still figuring out how to do that. I want you to choose me."

She bounced a little with exasperation. "Snot, you already _won_. I'm choosing you now. I'm saying I'll marry you!"

"Because what- your dad's in jail?" He shook his head. "It's not because you want _me_."

"I can't _make_ myself want you!" The hands on her face were reminding her of the night she kissed him, of the tender way his lips molded against hers. She'd felt nothing then, not even a spark. How different would things be if she had- how much happier she'd be if she could. But she couldn't warm her heart to him as much as she could harden it against Hiccup. "You can't give me a choice and then begrudge me my answer. That's not a choice at all."

"I don't have any say in what happens with your dad," he told her lowly. "Everything's in chaos, Stoick's not listening to the council, nobody knows what to believe. I can't stop this."

"You can!" Her voice sounded too much like a helpless squeak for her liking. "You just _won't_."

"I can't change the law, Astrid. He broke the contract, and now he owes my dad money. You weren't cheap, you know."

The words were like a slap across the cheek. She stepped back, away from his hands. Her axe started to slip from her grip in her shock, but she caught it before it fell at her side. "I'll give you a hint, Snot." She sniffed, wiping the back of her hand across her nose and twisting away. "If you want a girl to like you, at least pretend like you care what happens to her family. Because she does."

With that, she turned and descended the steps of the Jorgensons' house. Her eyes still felt wet and warm, even though she wasn't crying yet. It was cold, and she wondered if her dad would have blankets in his cell or if he was shivering like she was. Folding her arms around her, she pressed her hands beneath her underarms and tried to warm her frozen fingers. A storm raged in her chest, thundering and crashing against her lungs.

Astrid was halfway home when she was jerked into the shadows. Hiccup pinned her against her neighbor's house, hands on her shoulders and forehead pressed to hers. His eyes were closed, so she let hers fall shut too. He didn't kiss her, didn't say anything. For a long moment, he just stood there, trembling with what she suspected was anger and breathing hot air into her face. His braid slid over his shoulder, brushing her ear. His fingertips dug into the spot on her back that was still tender, but she didn't mention it or pull away.

His chest brushed against hers when he took a breath to speak. "What did he say? What did he decide?"

She wanted to wrap her arms around him, to bury her face in his neck. But she was still angry too. Every part of her felt scraped raw. A tiny part of her that she'd never acknowledge out loud wanted to blame him for ever coming to Berk. She hated that he was letting her father pay for the choices they had made.

"I'm not sure," she replied honestly. "But he won't do anything about my dad."

His exhale was long and measured. Hiccup's hand slid from her shoulder to the back of the neck. He found the bruise of his claim and traced the shape of it beneath her braid. "This doesn't mean anything to you, does it?"

"Of course it does." She opened her eyes to look at his face- it was drawn tight and controlled. "You mean everything to me. But my dad will die in that prison. We'll never get the money in time."

Hiccup pressed into the claim. She felt the soft soreness twinge under his calloused touch. "Your dad entrusted you to me. Think about that, Astrid." He covered the entire back of her neck with his palm, brushing his thumb just below her ear. "He would rather die in prison than give you up to those people. He could've let them take you, waited until the queen was dead, but he wanted to keep you safe. Now he expects me to keep you safe."

His other hand slid to her throat, forming a loose collar around her neck.

"If that means I have to steal you away from Snotlout on your wedding day and take you back to my nest, I will." His forehead felt almost hot against hers. "If it means shutting the door on your dad, I will."

Astrid lifted her chin, twisting against his light hold. "I didn't fight for my freedom just to be another man's prisoner," she whispered.

"You're not my prisoner," he growled, baring his teeth. "You're my

mate. My family. My future. My bite is written on your skin, and as long as it's there, you belong to me." His nose brushed against hers, his body crushing her to the wall. "I didn't take it from you. You gave it to me. Just like I don't get to run off and leave you, you don't get to leave me either."

"That's different." She shook her head. "It's my dad. If it was your mom's life at risk, you'd do the same thing."

"No. My mom's never done anything she hasn't wanted to do." Hiccup caressed her neck so softly, but his face was such a hard mask of defiance. "I'd trust her, and I'd trust you. He made a sacrifice to prove he loves you, so don't make it for nothing. Don't make _everything_ we've done be nothing."

She lifted her hand to beat a weak fist against his chest. Leaning her head forward, onto his shoulder, she coughed on her tears. "I don't know what to do. Hiccup, I'm so scared. I don't know what to do."

"We'll figure it out." His hands slid into her hair, feeling ice cold against her scalp. "We'll change Berk's mind. Defeat the queen. Get your dad back. I'm going to keep you _safe_, Astrid. Whatever it takes."

Wet streaks froze on her cheeks. She knotted her cold fingers into his shirt, searching for warmth. "I want to kiss you. But I'm still so mad."

"That's okay," he muttered into her hair. "I'm still angry too."

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.

Just breathe.

28. Chapter 28

****Chapter Twenty-eight.****

Astrid stared up at the gray sheet of clouds that hung over Berk. The sky was starting to darken, and villagers milled about the streets in pairs and small groups. A couple of them stared at her as they passed, but Astrid didn't bother checking to see if their expressions were ones of satisfaction or sympathy. They'd always watched her before, usually with admiration, but now she felt as if she'd become a criminal the public had to be wary of. She leaned her head back against the prison's exterior wall. She willed herself to go inside, to make her feet move from the spot where they'd turned to stone.

She could never remember a time when her father was angry with her. Occasionally annoyed, yes, when she would sneak away from Gothi's side as a child to watch the night raids. He gave her the occasional stern scowl over the dinner table when she asked why her Uncle Finn hadn't come back yet. But for the most part, she did what she could to please her parents. She listened with the intent to obey, trained daily to restore her family's honor, succeeded at taking first place in dragon training. Her parents had never had reason to be

disappointed in her until lately.

Balling her hands into fists, she swore under her breath and squeezed her eyes shut.

Just do it. Just go. Whatever he has to say to you, it's nothing compared to what he's done for your sake.

She was a coward. Her mother had been to visit him. Stoick had seen him. Even Hiccup snuck in during the dark hours of night to take him food. It wasn't that she was afraid of his temper, or the black glare of his fury. She simply couldn't face him. The guilt crushed her lungs, made it hard to breathe. The evening frost was already turning her fingers numb, but she had gloves to return to, furs to climb under. The thought of her father freezing in the open-air cells made self-loathing scorch her tightening throat.

Finally, after almost an hour of trying to summon her courage, she pushed away from the wall and stomped through the snow the entire way home.

Her mother was waiting for her when she ducked in the warm house, and Astrid was immediately aware of a delicious scent curling through the air. It made her brows instantly go up. The last few days, they'd been living off of fish caught by Toothless and whatever flour and yeast the Ingermans could spare. What she smelled was rich, heady, and made her mouth water.

"Ah, Astrid," her mother murmured, using a thick cloth to transfer a shallow cast iron pot into a cloth-lined basket. "Perfect. I need yeh ta take this to the Haddock's." The lid rattled as she adjusted it and folded the cloth over the top.

It was still so strange, hearing that name spoken as a plural. Grouping Stoick and Hiccup together as one. Her brain hadn't quite yet accepted that they were no longer two completely separate facets of her life.

"You're cooking for them?" she asked, detaching her axe and leaning it against the front door. Crossing the room to the table, she sniffed at the basket.

"For us." Her mom nodded towards the hearth, and Astrid noticed the two covered bowls keeping warm near the fire.

She immediately understood. Ever since the first council meeting, the elders watched Stoick suspiciously. Whispers of his bias were muttered through the streets, of his seemingly blind acceptance of the dragon rider. While many of Berk's citizens believed that Hiccup truly was who he claimed to be, still more distrusted him and accused Stoick of believing too easily. And where Astrid was, Hiccup usually followed. Stoick was incapable of getting too close to her family, of providing too much aid without raising suspicions. Talk of favoritism was becoming common, and with as much as the village had been turned on its head, the chief couldn't stand to lose any more political support.

Shifting her gaze to the ingredients on the counter, Astrid let a tiny smile start on her lips. So Stoick had found a way around their food shortage. As long as her mother was providing them a service by

cooking, nobody could raise any eyebrows. Her stomach growled loudly at the thought of her first real meal in weeks.

"It'll be waiting for yeh when yeh get back," her mom informed her, shoving rolls into the basket before wiping her hands on her apron and stepping away. "What about Stormfly? What does she eat?"

The corner of her mouth tugged even higher, her heart giving a squeeze of affection. "She's fine," she answered easily. "She hangs around the island unless I call. She's good at fishing."

"She's been staring at Hoark's flock." The older woman's tone was suddenly warning. "He's asked yeh keep her away."

Astrid's hands, which had been reaching for the basket, stilled momentarily. "She just wants to play with them," she said crisply. "She doesn't even like mutton." Most of the dragons didn't, from what she'd seen. But she would put a copper piece down that the queen had a particular taste for sheep.

"Even so." She lifted her apron over her head, folding it and letting it rest over the back of a chair. Pushing gently at Astrid's back, she moved into the living room, where a pile of the Acks' mending waited to be done. "Hurry along. Get it to them while it's still hot."

She didn't need to be told twice. Between juggling neighbors' house repairs, delivering forge orders for Gobber, working on the netting for the set-up she was building for Stormy's spines- she'd hardly had a second to see Hiccup. He'd spent a lot of time shadowing Stoick these past few days. He was learning about the village, about its citizens, its way of life. Her path rarely intersected with his during the day.

The basket was heavy, requiring both hands to carry it. She focused on not dropping it or tripping over herself as she walked to the chief's house. When she arrived, she couldn't use her arm to knock, so she curled her lips in the chirpy whistle Hiccup had taught her to announce herself to Stormfly. After just a few beats of silence, the door swung open. Stoick stuck his head out, brows furrowed, but then his expression relaxed when he saw her standing there.

"Ah! Evenin', Astrid. Come in, come in." Gesturing her in, he easily took the basket from her with one hand and nudged her into the warmth. The chief's home was always small- having to constantly rebuild after fires meant only building as many rooms as necessary- but now it seemed cramped. There was a pallet by the hearth, much like the one her mother had made for Hiccup his first night back on Berk. Some of his things were leaning against the wall, and she recognized the scorch marks in the corner as Toothless'.

"Where's Hiccup?" she wondered aloud, eyes searching for her mate. Since things had calmed down, he'd been staying with Stoick. It was one of the many changes that she'd had to adjust to. All part of the scheme to make their relationship seem less than what it was. To make Stoick's decisions seem as objective as possible.

"He went flying," the chief answered flatly. He obviously still wasn't completely comfortable with the idea. "He should be back soon."

"Okay." Astrid hoped her disappointment didn't show. That meant she could quit trying to peek around the corners to see if he would pop up. She folded her arms over her chest and watched Stoick set down the food on his tiny kitchen table. "I guess I'll, um. I guess I'll go, then." She suddenly felt awkward, alone in the chief's house without his son.

"Wait!" He motioned for her to be still, reaching into the purse at his belt and pulling out a silver. Stoick took her hand and pressed the coin into her palm. "Here. For the meal, and for bringing it."

Astrid gaped, ogling the silver. It was an extravagantly priced dinner, if that was to be her payment. That one little piece alone could buy a week's worth of meals. Her first thought was that he'd given her the wrong coin, but the silver was sitting flat in her hand, plain as day, and he wasn't moving to exchange it or claim he'd made a mistake.

"This- this is too much," she stammered, pushing it back towards him. Even as she said it, though, she eyed the silver piece with lust. It wouldn't be nearly what she needed to buy her father's freedom, but it was certainly more than she'd made in the past three days of odd jobs.

"It's not," Stoick pressed, folding her fingers over the coin. He took a step back towards the table. "I'm actually glad yeh came. Could yeh spare a moment ta talk?"

She let her hand tighten on the silver piece, glancing at it as she brought it close. Nodding, she squeezed it until the edges dug into her palm and moved to the chair he was pulling out for her. Before Hiccup had come along, she would have been pleased to be invited to a conversation with Stoick- he so rarely instigated them. But now she didn't know what to expect of anyone in her village. Stoick, especially. Shifting in her seat uncomfortably, she held her spine straight and kept her shoulders back. For some reason, she had the odd thought that her posture had become poorer lately.

"I... I haven't yet had a chance ta talk to yeh alone," Stoick began, taking the chair across from her. He looked as awkward as she felt, wringing his giant hands and not quite meeting her eyes. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he inhaled deeply. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. For everything. It's been weighin' on me for a while now, but I haven't had a chance ta say it."

"It's okay," she insisted, shaking her head. Decent as it was of him, hearing an apology from one of the men she most admired felt strange.

"No. It's not." He adjusted his helmet on his head self-consciously. "I owe yeh more than I could ever pay back in silver or gold. You brought my son back ta me, gave me somethin' I never dreamed I could have in this lifetime. And I fought yeh every step of the way, suspected yeh and mistreated yeh." Stoick stared at the tabletop in shame. "If it weren't for you, I would've killed Hiccup before I ever knew who he was. So, I'm sorry- for everything. And thank you- for everything."

Astrid's cheeks felt overly warm. Protecting Hiccup wasn't something she'd necessarily done for Stoick, but she was glad that her chief was able to be reunited with the family he thought was dead. It made a twinge of guilt flare up to think about Valka. It didn't feel right accepting his thanks while she still knew that secret.

Stoick sighed then, looking up at her. "I'm going ta do my best ta protect you and yer family from here on out," he told her, tone even. "I can't do everything I want to right now, but if it comes down to it, yeh have an ally with me, understand?"

She nodded. "Thank you, chief."

He cleared his throat and squirmed in his chair. He laced his fingers together and set his hands on the tabletop. Suddenly he was incapable of holding her gaze again. "Also. I don't know if he's made this clear to yeh, but I think you've earned the right to know that Hiccup has- ah- plans." Stoick looked incredibly uncomfortable. "I don't know what things are like between you two, but I know yeh were reluctant ta take Snot's offer before Hiccup even came along."

She raised a brow at him.

"I just want yeh ta know- if it comes to it, it's yer choice. I don't want yeh to think I'd force you inta something like this just because it's what Hiccup wants. You deserve better than that. You've proved as much."

Astrid couldn't help the tug of amusement twitching at the edge of her lips. She felt her taut posture relax just a fraction. "Hiccup wants to marry me," she deadpanned.

Stoick seemed to cringe.

She laughed, shaking her head. The chief blinked up at her, brows climbing his forehead.

"Hiccup's been wanting to marry me for weeks," she confessed, resting back against her chair. "He doesn't exactly keep it a secret."

Stoick's expression seemed a little astonished. "Yeh already knew? And... And have yeh given him a reply?"

Allowing herself a half-smile, she dropped her gaze to her lap and fingered the silver piece's edge. Things were rough with Hiccup right now. Ever since she'd gone to Snotlout to try and trade for her father's freedom, there'd been friction between them. Not enough to cause a fight, but enough that there was a distance. But her feelings for him hadn't changed. "I don't know if I want it as soon as he does. I'd like things to settle around here first. Let him get accustomed to Berk and let Berk get accustomed to him."

He made a noise of understanding.

"But... yes." She nodded. "I don't know how it started, but Hiccup's become very precious to me. He's... incredible." Pressing her one thumbnail into the edge of her cuticles, she tried to keep a blush from rising to her face. "We've made promises to each other, for after the war is over."

His swallow was so loud she could hear it over the crackling fire. The chief laid his hands flat on the table. "I see. Alright, then." His sigh sounded somehow both relieved and nervous. "I want yeh ta know- I'd pay off yer father's debt, if I could."

"I'm not interested in being bought again," she said before thinking. Then as soon as the words were off her tongue, she tensed. She was forgetting her place again.

"It wouldn't be like that." His stubby fingers curled into his palms. "Not like a mundr. But the council, and the laws-"

"I know," she exhaled sharply.

"I talked ta Hiccup about it." Curiosity tickled in the back of her mind, wondering how much Stoick and his son had been discussing her and her family. They were finding solutions to her debt, debating marriage. Had Hiccup asked him to present a mundr as a form of payment? "He doesn't fully understand contracts and bride prices and ceremonies-"

"I know," she repeated, feeling a little shy again.

"And that's fine." Stoick's chair creaked as he straightened. "He is my son. His inheritance is his. I can teach him the proper way of things. But where yer concerned, Astrid..." He kept his gaze level. "Whatever yeh want ta do, we'll do. You name the conditions. You make the contract."

She wet her lips and fiddled with the piece of silver gripped tightly in her lap. "I want to discuss it with Hiccup," she told him. "And my parents, when the time comes. After all this passes. But if you're worried about me changing my mind between now and then, that's not going to happen." Her eyes flicked to the pallet on the floor, slid up the staff tucked against the hearth.

The front door clicked open, and a dark blur came bouncing in. Toothless warbled a happy greeting at her, jumping into the rafters and back down, licking her cheek in excitement. Astrid cringed and scraped the back of her sleeve against her sticky face, but laughed and scratched beneath his chin.

"Don't believe her, Dad." Hiccup's voice was easy when it floated over her shoulder. His gaze was on her, and she twisted to frown at him. "She panics when she's cornered."

"Hiccup!" Stoick scowled, his hands balling with annoyance. He narrowed his eyes at his son as the younger man crawled inside and kicked the door closed behind him. "That's no way ta speak about Astrid. Tell her you're sorry."

"I'm sorry," he echoed. He stood to cross the room, brushing her braid aside and dropping a kiss on the back of her neck before shrugging out of his cloak and moving to drop it with the rest of his things.

"It's okay," she murmured to Stoick. Giving him a tight smile, she stood and stepped away from the table. "He's not happy with me right now."

Hiccup said something in dragonese under his breath but then returned to where they were gathered. He knotted his fingers in the side of her shirt like a little child trying not to lose his mother in a crowd. Then he pulled her close and nuzzled her shoulder. "I went by your house. Your mom said you were here."

"I brought dinner," she explained, turning into his affection and reaching up to his hair. There was a small braid that looked like it'd been tangled and come undone in the wind. She smoothed it out and redid the tiny plait before tucking it back in place. "It's still hot."

"Are you going to stay and eat with us?"

She shook her head. He pressed his forehead against hers, sighing. They'd known it'd be like this, chasing down minutes to share, but she'd misjudged how badly she'd want to stick to him like a second skin. She was reluctant to move. "I've got things to do at home."

There was a silence, and then she blinked. When they turned to look at Stoick, he was staring at them with a dropped jaw. She realized that her hands were resting on his ribs, and that he was still holding onto her shirt. Flushing brightly, she broke his hold and pulled away.

"I should, um." Embarrassment scorched her cheeks. "I should go back and help Mom." Eyes on the floor, she gave Hiccup's wrist a little squeeze before turning away. "I'll see you later, chief."

She could feel three pairs of green eyes on her as she tried to chase her dignity out the door. Behind her, she heard a shocked voice mumble, "Aye. Night, Astrid."

* * *

><p>"No," she said firmly, shaking her head and pointing to the sketch Hiccup had drawn of the dragon queen. It was a grotesque picture- multiple eyes, an enormous horn, razor-sharp teeth. She'd shuddered the first time he showed it to her, remembering the claws encrusted in volcanic rock that slashed through stone. "No, her hide is too thick. Your arrows are going to be worthless."<p>

"Well, what do yeh suggest then?" Spitelout was clearly aggravated by this strategy meeting. She and Hiccup were the only two who'd seen the monster, so they were the authorities to whom questions were directed. It made the head Jorgenson seethe. "Swords? Axes? There's nothing we can do from the ground if it's as tall as yeh claim."

Before she answered, Gobber nudged Hiccup. "What do yeh think? Will swords or axes be able to cut the skin?" He rested his mug-hand on the tabletop. "I'll need more iron before I can forge anythin'. We're low again."

Her boyfriend sat forward, his mouth set in a frown. He'd been quiet through most of the meeting. "Axes won't be much help. Swords, probably, but you'll have to use them in less protected areas." Pointing to the parchment, he tapped a couple of spots of the queen's

anatomy. "Behind her knees, underneath her arms, beneath her jaw."

Stoick glanced at Gobber. "Trader Johan should be here any day. Yeh'll get yer metal."

There was an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach. That boat was supposed to be coming with supplies for her wedding to Snotlout. Now it was full of useless fabric and ales when what they really needed were weapons and armor.

"Spitelout has a point, though." Phlegma the Fierce spoke up from the far side of the table. "What use will those weapons do us if none of us can reach any higher than the beast's ankles?"

"Who said we're all going to be on the ground?" Astrid jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the Night Fury waiting patiently by the fire for his rider. "Hiccup and I can handle aerial attacks. And anyone on the ground is going to need projectiles. Custom ones."

"They'll have to be light, so we can move them." Hiccup added. "We can't bring the boats too close to the island. We'll be going in practically blind if we try and attack the mountain- there's gases, steam, and not to mention plenty of rubble waiting to crush us to death. We're going to have to draw her out onto the shore. Giant fire breather, big wooden boats- how's your swimming?"

A low grumbling rose from the table.

"So, sharp projectiles. Light and easily transportable. Enormous dragon-sized." She ticked off the requirements on her fingers, raising her brows at Gobber. "Is that something you can make?"

"I'll draw up some ideas."

"What about the terrain? Could we set up men from above?" Stoick shifted the paper so that he could closer inspect the rough sketch of dragon island in the corner.

She and Hiccup looked at each other, and she felt her mouth twisting with uncertainty.

"It'll depend on how much damage she causes to the mountain," Hiccup answered after a moment. "I wouldn't put anyone higher than her head, just in case."

"Does it not have a blind spot?" Snotlout asked.

Astrid glanced up. He wasn't seated next to his father, which was unusual, and he wasn't as vocal as he generally was during talk of battle and war. He was slouched in his chair, boots propped up on the table, and he kept a deep frown as he looked at her.

"It's got six eyes," she replied, the gentle tone to her voice surprising even herself. "Small, but it's got good vantage. Hiccup says it's probably better at smelling out its prey than anything."

Snot shrugged. "So... take out its nose." He lifted his chin in Toothless' direction. "Couldn't you and your dragons run some hooks

through its nostrils? Can't smell much with blood in its nasal... cavity... thing."

Astrid felt herself pause. "That's... not actually a bad idea." She glanced back at Hiccup, whose face was pale and neutral. He just gave her a noncommittal grunt.

"In fact, why not take out all its senses while you're up there?" His chair scraped along the floor as he sat up, and he leaned one elbow against the table. "If we keep by its feet, keep it distracted-you're the best knife thrower in the village. Your dragon shoots spikes. Couldn't you get its eyes too? Those are soft and squishy-you don't need any heavy duty weapons for that."

"Yeh risk making it mad," Stoick noted, stroking his beard. "We don't know enough about its shot limit or its fire."

"It's got an impressive range," she informed him. Even now, she could feel the heat from that night against her back. "Seems more lava-based than magnesium. Less Nadder, more Nightmare."

The chief tilted his head, acknowledging her comment. "I don't know that I feel comfortable having just you and Hiccup up there. If it gets angry, yeh won't have much cover."

"Toothless is a Night Fury," she pressed. "Stormfly is a Nadder. If you had to pick two of the fastest dragons we know of, it'd be these two. If we can't do it, nobody can."

"What we need is more dragon riders," Gobber muttered under his breath, but that earned him a sharp look from Spitelout.

"The way I see it-" Snot was sitting forward now, brows high with interest as he leaned over to grab the drawing. "You guys buy us time first. Keep its attention off the ground while we work on slicing through the back of its knees. When it buckles, its neck'll be lower to the ground. Then you guys can keep out of reach while we climb. Take out the wings if you have to-" He wrinkled his nose at the sketch. "Do these even work? Whatever- hook the nostrils. Pierce the eyes. Shred the wings. We can work on cutting through the skin and tendons here, and get a team on the neck and a team on the belly. One of them'll be able to reach an artery if we give 'em enough time. Hel, we might even be able to get some meat off of her."

There was a sudden clatter next to her. The table's attention snapped from Snotlout to the chief's son, who was abruptly scrambling to his hands and feet and sprinting for the doors. Hiccup ducked outside without a word, and Toothless bounded after him. Astrid froze, and Stoick shouted his name. Pushing from the table, Stoick ran after him, but the whole room watched him go still after shoving the heavy door open.

Over the stunned silence, she could just barely make out the faint noises of wheezing and vomiting. Her stomach twisted. She felt glued to her spot, listening to the sound of her mate retching and coughing outside. Shame and guilt clenched her heart in a hard fist.

Snotlout made a low scoffing noise and shook his head, but he at least knew better than to comment. Gobber stared at the chief's back, and Stoick stood there in uncertain shock. The debate on his face was

clear- the father who wanted to be a parent, the man who grew up childless.

Astrid bit the inside of her cheek to refocus. She pressed her hands flat into the table and cleared her throat to draw the table's attention back to her. Several eyes turned to her. In curiosity. In suspicion. For questions and guidance.

"No," she told them on an uneasy exhale. "No meat."

* * *

><p>Her eyelids didn't even feel heavy as she watched the orange flames licking light across the Haddocks' living room. Even though the sun dipped beneath the horizon a long time ago. Even though she'd been up almost twenty-four hours now. She didn't even feel the weight of exhaustion in her bones. She felt restless.<p>

"Go home, Astrid." Stoick appeared once again in the doorway of his bedroom. He was fully dressed, but his helmet was hung by the door. He might as well have been naked to her, but she didn't shift her gaze to look at him anyways. "If he comes back tonight, he'll probably go looking for you first. No point in yeh stayin' here."

She shook her head and chewed at a jagged fingernail. "Nn-nh. He'll come here." If she was honest, he probably would go to her window before he came to Stoick's house. To his house. But his things were still resting by the hearth- his staff and his facemask. As long as those things were still there, he'd be back for them. And she'd be there when he came.

The chief's sigh was long and heavy. "Yeh have things ta do tomorrow."

"I'll get them done."

He didn't argue. After a few minutes of hovering, he turned and shut the door behind him once more.

She flinched when she accidentally bit through part of her fingertip. She tasted blood on her tongue and immediately wrapped the finger in the hem of her shirt and squeezed it tight. Sighing, she shifted in her chair and laid her head down on the tabletop.

She was going to kill him. After she kissed him. Hiccup couldn't keep running away like this. Irritation scrubbed at the inside of her chest, but it was accented by the occasional pang of sorrow. She should have known how difficult that meeting must have been for him. All of Valka's accusations were ringing in her ears, telling her that she was violent and bloodthirsty. Hiccup had never killed a dragon in his life. And now they were asking him to tear one apart piece by piece.

Flying sounded good to her. It would clear her head. But she wanted to wait up for him, to be there when he came. So she stared into the fire and kicked off her boots, tucking her feet under her lap. She stretched out her stiff shoulder and practiced making her dagger dance through her fingers.

Stoick's snore eventually rose over the quiet night air, and the corner of her mouth lifted just slightly. She could understand why Hiccup complained about it being too noisy. Letting her weapon slip into her boot for safekeeping, she brought her knees to her chest and listened to the deafening rumble.

It was so loud that she almost missed the sound of the door opening behind her. But she definitely felt the cold air that snaked in and chilled down her spine.

Astrid sat up straight, twisting in her chair. Hiccup let Toothless in after him, and then silently shut himself inside. The dragon wobbled tiredly to the corner and scorched the floor beneath him before plopping into a curled ball.

"Hiccup!" She jumped from her chair, rushing to meet him. He was cold to the touch, his skin frozen and pale. There was snow in his hair that was glittering as it melted.

"Shh," he hushed her, frigid hands slipping beneath her shirt to find the warmth of her back. Lips like ice kissed through her bangs, down her temple, to her ear. "I'm sorry. I left you behind again."

She pressed her palms to his neck, trying to let some heat melt into his body. "You shouldn't have had to listen to that. I know it must've been difficult."

His sigh said as much. It was sharp and heavy. She wondered if he'd been expecting to come back to her wrath. His mouth brushed across her jaw until it stumbled across hers, tucking her close to his body. Cold seeped through his clothes, made her break into gooseflesh.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, words mumbled by his kiss.

"It's okay--"

"No. I'm sorry I've been short with you lately." He traced his fingertips up her vertebrae, thumbs brushing absent circles just beneath the edges of her bindings. His nose nuzzled against hers. "Ever since you went to the Jorgensons. You did what you thought you had to. I know that, it's just... hard. He has money, and he's a real Viking, and he could do for you what I couldn't. And I blamed you because I felt inadequate. I'm sorry."

She didn't know how to reply, so she just stepped back and pulled him further inside, closer to the fire. "You need to warm up."

Hiccup shook his head. "I need you." One hand slipped from her back to cup her face, and he molded his chapped lips against hers again. There was a little more depth to this kiss, a taste of hunger and want.

It quickly became a contest to see who could stir the most heat between them. She pressed the backs of her fingers to his cheeks, rubbed her palms up and down his arms. He slipped beneath the waistband of her skirt, kneading the flesh of her ass as he pulled her against him. His fingertips found the tender spot at the nape of her neck where her claim was yellowing and fading. Her traitorous throat made a soft noise when his tongue tangled with hers.

Hiccup made his intentions clear. He unclasped his cloak and let it fall to the floor with a thump. Backing her into the table, he shifted her up and over the edge and parted her knees so he could settle between them.

"Your dad-" she mumbled. Stoick's snoring still growled from his room.

"Shh," he whispered, covering her mouth with his thumb and kissing a trail down her neck. "Need me." He laved at the lines of her throat, pushed her braid back with his nose so that he could reach more of her pale skin.

The thickening bulge pressing into her center made her squirm, the skull studs of her skirt scraping against the tabletop. She gave in, reaching between them to fumble for that stiffening flesh. "I do."

Hiccup hissed at the pressure. Her shirt was shoved up past her breasts. Her bindings were untangled and her leggings tugged down. The knot of his pants was undone with shaking fingers, his breath steaming in the hollow of her throat as she worked him free. Insistent impatience made them clumsy, but neither of them cared. Astrid didn't realize how badly she did need this- just to be close to him, to take him inside her, to share in his pleasure.

She grunted when he filled her, the noise lusty and unladylike. Pressing forward, he leaned her back so that she was laid across the Haddock's tiny kitchen table. She lost kisses in his hairline, in his crown, breathing encouragement and pleas of yes and more and Hiccup. Her ankles locked around his narrow waist, his hipbones digging into her inner thighs with every careful stroke.

They had to be cautious- if he shoved in her the way they both craved, the legs of the table scraped against the floor. So he was forced to move slowly, slick friction amplified with every gentle thrust. It was torture- it was heaven. She dug her heels into his lower back, holding him deep as he rocked into her. His mouth found the peaks of her breasts, and she dug nails bitten to the quick from hours of waiting into his shoulders. They murmured apologies and new promises into each other's skin.

Her knees clamped hard at his sides when she came, catapulted over the edge by the feeling of his calloused hands tracing her waist. He mashed his lips against hers to swallow her sharp cry, quietly groaning at the way her muscles fluttered and choked him. It was only a few more uneven strokes before he reached his own orgasm. His teeth nipped and bit at her chest the entire time he stayed buried inside her.

Hiccup didn't pull away immediately, resting on top of her and picking a few strands from her braid to wrap around his fingers. She stared at the ceiling and combed her fingers through his hair. The weight of his head against her breast was relaxing- he'd shoved her shirt even higher so he could hear her heartbeat. The sleepiness that should have weighed her down hours ago finally started to make her body heavy and her eyes burn.

"I found the others," he mumbled some few minutes later. He traced

the pattern of her plait with his thumb. "The ones that were here before."

It took her a moment to realize she was talking about the dragons. "Were they safe?" she whispered. "The queen didn't find them, did she?"

Hiccup shook his head. "They've been staying out of her range, on an island not far from here. They asked about you."

Astrid found herself snorting softly. "Oh really?"

"Mhm," he replied, not hearing the sarcasm in her tone. "They hadn't seen you since you got hurt, so they were worried. The Gronkle, especially. They're the ones who made me realize I had to come back."

A disbelieving smile broke on her lips, and she rolled her eyes. She wouldn't believe it if he'd tried to tell her that even a month ago. Dragons- asking after her health- how ridiculous. But he'd done more impossible things than hold a conversation with dragons. There weren't many things he could tell her that she wouldn't believe anymore.

"I asked them to come back with me," he confessed.

Her smile faltered just a little. "They didn't?"

"No." He brushed the tail of her braid across the bridge of his nose. "But it was worth asking."

"I'm glad you got them out," she sighed, trying to remember if she'd ever told him so. "I wouldn't want to come back either, if I were them. This place is... not exactly friendly. To me or them."

"Just a little longer." He dropped her hair, rising up on his elbows to steal a quick kiss. "A few more days. Things'll start to change."

Staring up at him fondly, she pushed his bangs away from his forehead. She hoped so. For her sake. For his. For her father's. Things needed to change, and soon. They needed to win the village over, take out the queen, pay back Spitelout Jorgenson. She had a list of duties a mile long, and Hiccup still needed to assimilate to life on Berk.

But for now- for now she would straighten her bindings, fix her clothes. She'd make a note to have tea with her breakfast. She'd stretch out on the pallet by the hearth and steal a few hours of sleep to the sound of Hiccup's humming and Stoick's snoring.

29. Chapter 29

****Chapter Twenty-Nine. ****

"I really don't understand how someone gets to be this bad at sewing," Ruffnut ranted as she attacked the knots of thread Astrid had somehow managed to entangle with tiny scissors. "Do you just close your eyes and stab, hoping for the best?"

"That's not entirely off," she muttered, dodging infant fingers as they reached towards her face.

"It's like you tried to sew the ankle to the crotch," Ruff continued. Shaking her head in disbelief, she held the leggings up and inspected the bunching inseam before scoffing with disgust. "This is a level of incompetence I didn't think you were capable of."

"What's incompetence?" the little girl braiding Astrid's hair chirped. Ruffnut's cousin hadn't removed her hands from Astrid's blonde waves since her mother left and plopped a baby on the young woman's lap.

"It's when you suck at something," Ruffnut answered promptly. "Like Astrid. Astrid sucks at housework."

Clenching her jaw, the girl in question glared at her friend but didn't argue. The Thorstons were finding most of her odd jobs around the village. The Thorstons were paying her for babysitting. And Ruffnut had come over to fix the disasters Astrid was too ashamed to ask her mom for help with. She could take a few well-deserved digs in exchange for their support.

"Don't be like Astrid," Ruff went on, pointing her sewing needle at her small cousin. "Or you'll be useless when your dad goes to jail and you'll have to sell your body to the night to buy him out."

With a roll of her eyes, she twisted to look at the child behind her. "Nobody's selling any bodies to the night."

Alma wrinkled her nose at the young women and went back to her braiding.

Astrid adjusted the baby sitting in the bend of her legs. She could feel his drool-covered fists leaving warm, wet patches on her shirt. His hair smelled nice, like milk and something sweeter. Oddly enough, she felt more anxious with a baby in her arms than she ever did with a weapon. Swords and knives could be fixed and reforged and made again. Children were irreplaceable. It was partly why she'd been nervous about ever having children. She'd never even let herself entertain the thought, because having a baby in a war-torn, starved village like Berk seemed unfair. Until Hiccup came along.

"I'm making more doing the men's jobs anyways," she said matter-of-factly, pushing the thoughts away. "I'm better with an axe than half of 'em, too."

"Of course you are," Ruffnut snorted. "Does that mean Hiccup'll be doing all the sewing and washing after everything settles down?"

"It means you should be careful what you say before I show you exactly how good I am with an axe."

"I hate to say it, Astrid." Lifting the leggings to her mouth, Ruffnut used her teeth to rip apart a knot. When she tugged at it, the bunching fabric smoothed out perfectly. "But ever since you've gone all soft and gotten yourself a boyfriend, I really can't take your threats seriously anymore."

Something sort of like a smile pulled at one side of her lips. Baby Abram curled tiny fingers around her pinky. "Don't worry about me," she sighed, head jerking back when Alma pulled a little too hard. "I might be soft, but my axe is sharp as ever."

Ruffnut took a breath to continue their banter, but before she could make her next quip, the Hoffersons' front door burst open. Tuff stood with his hands on the doorframe, out of breath as he panted, "Happening- it's happening!"

Astrid's arms were wrapping around the baby and trying to push to her feet in a heartbeat, but she was yanked back down by the hair still held in little fingers. Was the raid alarm ringing- how did she not hear it? Why now, with only a few days until they were to sail to Dragon Island? Where was her axe? As if she'd been tugged to action by puppet strings, she began to strategize a safe plan for hiding the children.

"Freya's tits, are you trying to give us a heart attack?" Ruffnut snapped at her brother. "What? _What's_ happening?"

His wide eyes shifted between their faces. "Snotlout and Hiccup- they finally- it's awesome, you've gotta see this!"

Relief hit her just before dread sank down to the pit of Astrid's stomach. Reaching behind her, she untangled her hair from Alma's hands and knotted it in a quick plait. Then she stood and ordered the girl into her furs while tucking her brother into a thick blanket. "Quick quick quick," she muttered, rushing to the door where Tuff was waiting. "Come on, we'll be right back."

It was snowing lightly outside, and for all she wanted to sprint after Tuff's bouncing dreadlocks, she had to make sure she didn't jostle Abram, make sure his face was guarded from the cold. Alma held onto her cousin's skirt, and Astrid kept glancing back to make sure she hadn't fallen behind. But her thoughts were scattered still- she could only imagine what kind of repercussions there would be for Hiccup if he hurt Snotlout, or what kind of injuries he might sustain himself.

There was a little crowd gathered in the middle of the street not far from the chief's house. Something hard and cold in her throat made it difficult to swallow. She let Ruff and Tuff elbow a space open for her and squeezed between their shoulders.

If any blows had been thrown already, she couldn't tell. Snotlout's face was twisted in an angry snarl, his fist tight around his hammer. He was swinging, reaching, but Hiccup was sliding just out of reach before the attacks could find their target. The staff she'd seen used almost entirely for communication had become a weapon. It deflected strikes, rattling and cracking so loudly she feared it would snap in two.

As a friend, and as a mate, she watched with panic. All it would take was one misstep or a second of hesitation, and one of them might be snatched from her life forever. It was a different fear than the kind that she shoved down during late-night raids. There, she knew Snotlout was capable and Hiccup was safe. But this was a fight between men, instincts and pride. That made them unpredictable.

But as a shield maiden, she watched with analyzing eyes. She held the baby close to her chest, holding a protective hand over his face as she observed their footwork, their grips on their respective weapons. Snotlout was clearly the aggressor, as always. It was the same way he sparred, the same way he fought while trying to take down a Nightmare. He was really at a disadvantage, with his body type and weapon of choice. Hiccup wasn't just taller- his staff had a longer reach.

She could guess that Snotlout had been the first to swing, just by the way Hiccup seemed to dance around his blows. Her mate's fighting looked almost completely defensive, relaxed and a little sloppy compared to Snot's angry attacks. It was reminiscent of the way he played with the dragon hatchlings at the nest, almost teasing in the way he ducked and twisted and slipped out of reach.

"Hiccup!" she shouted over the crowd's excited murmurings. "Snot! Cut it out!"

The pair didn't even slow, though Hiccup's gaze did flick her way for just a moment. Annoyance struck her. If only she didn't have Abram wrapped up in her arms, she could get between them. As it stood, she was forced to stand back and watch them trade blows.

"I guess they finally officially met," Ruffnut said cheerfully, a little sick amusement in her face.

"Idiots," Astrid hissed. Her heart leapt into her throat when Snotlout's hammer swung terrifyingly close to Hiccup's knee. "We leave for the dragons' nest in three days. If either one of them gets injured, our plan is screwed."

"I know this is unusual for me," Tuffnut began, shrugging without taking his eyes off the fight. "But I'm gonna be the voice of reason. You totally left Snot for Hiccup. He's got every right to reclaim his honor like this."

She tried to ignore the faint stab of guilt in her stomach. When she glanced down at Alma to see if she'd heard, the little girl was blinking up at her with curious eyes. Astrid looked back to the conflict. "It's not the time."

Shifting the baby to her hip, she tried calling out again. "Hiccup! _Stop!_"

He flashed a frown at her as he stepped out of Snotlout's swinging range, snapping his jaws as if to say he wouldn't. But then on the next lunge, before his opponent's hammer could collide with his side, Hiccup spun his staff to its hook side and caught the head with a loud _crack_. With one grunted tug, he ripped the weapon out of his cousin's hand and sent it tumbling to the grass.

The audience of Vikings made various noises of surprise and disappointment. Astrid felt her chest relax just barely, allowing a shaky breath into her lungs. "Thank the gods," she whispered to herself, stepping forward to give the men a proper scolding.

But the fight, it seemed, wasn't over. While Hiccup was obviously trying not to drop into a surly crouch, Snotlout snarled and grabbed

for his arm. Her once-intended's fist swung out in an arc, just barely glancing across Hiccup's chin. Astrid gasped, stepping back and pressing a fussing Abram close. She watched in horror as her mate reacted out of instinct- he twisted, baring his teeth and slamming the weighted end of his staff against Snotlout's face. The young Viking fell to the ground with a thud.

The heartbeats that followed were so quiet that she could hear air scraping in and out of her throat. Hiccup blinked, stunned by his own actions, and then glanced to her with uncertainty etched across his features. The crowd whispered and watched him warily.

"Pick him up," she choked out, only barely relieved by Snotlout's weak groan. She looked at Tuffnut, jerking her chin towards the fallen young man. "Help him. Please."

And suddenly it felt like all the eyes were on her. The baby in her arms whimpered and snuffled unhappily, and she held him closer. "Shh, shh," she mumbled numbly. "I know, it's okay." To the crowd staring and whispering under their breaths, she snapped, "Gods, do you ever do anything other than sit on your thumbs and talk about people?" Other, stronger words were on the tip of her tongue, but there were little ones watching.

She tried to pretend like her hands weren't shaking when she adjusted the infant at her shoulder.

* * *

><p>The chunk of ice from Gothi's ice chest burned Astrid's fingers as she wrapped it in linen and passed it to Hiccup. He glanced away guiltily, but pressed the ice against his cheek.<p>

"I can't believe you two would be this stupid," Astrid muttered as she crossed the room and sat against the arm of Snotlout's chair. Picking up the bowl of something herbal and strong smelling, she glanced at the paste Gothi had made before dipping a finger and bringing it to Snotlout's brow. "You can't meet on the street like civil Vikings? You have to attack each other like Berserkers?"

Snotlout's eyes rolled to the ceiling. Hiccup asked, "What's a Berserker?"

"Shut up," she answered.

Snotlout scoffed almost inaudibly, slouching in his chair and glaring across the room. Astrid didn't miss the way resting his arms on the chair meant his forearm brushed her lower back. "I don't need a lecture from my ex-wife," he bit under his breath.

She pressed her fingertip into his still-bleeding injury, scowling and watching him wince. "Then act like it. Damn it, Snotlout- what was that even about? He did what I asked. He got rid of your hammer so the fight would _stop_."

"Oh, so you don't have to listen to a thing I say when we're betrothed, but as soon as it's off, you're calling the shots?" He looked away, frowning into the fire, but Astrid grabbed his chin and jerked his head back to her.

"When I'm the one not acting like an ass, yes, I give the orders."

"I think that's a little subjective," he grumbled, flicking his irritated gaze upwards. "I'd say your behavior's been a little ass-ish lately."

"Spell subjective," Hiccup grumbled.

"You're one to talk, Dragon-boy!" Snotlout surged as if to stand but Astrid clamped her hands on his shoulders and shoved him back down.

"For Thor's sake, would you guys stop it?" For a moment, the two men glared at each other over her shoulder. A twinge of guilt tugged at the pit of her stomach as she recalled Tuff's words from earlier—_he's got every right to reclaim his honor_. And he was right. She had no right to step in between them when she was half of what tore them apart. They were Vikings, and Vikings fought for what they wanted. So many things were changing around her—dragons were becoming allies, the Haddocks were becoming a family, and a chance at peace was within her fingertips—she had forgotten that some things never change. Like the kind of people Vikings could be. Quarrelous. Brutish. Hot-tempered.

But it had to end, or they'd die out before they even had a chance.

Astrid tapped a little harder than necessary on Snotlout's chin so that he'd look back in her direction. "Hiccup, this village is _not_ fond enough of you for you to be fighting." Snot's blue-grey eyes stayed on her as she spoke, like a sky heavy with rain. He didn't look away, even as she continued dabbing the herbal paste on the bleeding contusion. "It sucks, I know, but until they know they can trust you, you have to be as human as possible, understand?"

Her mate grunted something in dragonese. A reptilian hiss that made Snotlout's expression twitch.

"I'm sure he started it." She was careful not to press too hard into her patient's brow— it was still swollen and red, giving his features an uneven look. Her next sentence was spoken low. "Dragons only bite when bitten first, right?"

Snot jerked his head away and grabbed her wrist so she couldn't reach his injury. "Just take your freaky dragon boyfriend and leave, Astrid. I don't want to hear your cutesy couple talk."

She snatched her hand back and slammed the little bowl onto the table. "I was talking about _you_," she growled, not moving from her spot on the chair's arm. Ducking down to be sure they were at eye level, she poked a finger into his shoulder. "_You're_ the dragon that got bit. And now you're running around spitting fire and if you don't _watch_ yourself, you're gonna burn the village down."

Astrid stood and shoved her bangs back. "For Thor's sake, you two are _cousins_!" Her hands waved in the air for a moment, searching for the words to encapsulate her frustration. "I mean, do you even know what I'd _give_ to know my uncle's kids?" When she looked from one

side of the room to the other, they both had their gazes fixed on the floorboards.

For a moment, she could only cross her arms over her chest and pace. Her temper bubbled and boiled, only cooled by chilly flashes of guilt. Shaking her head, she licked her lips and rubbed her eyes. "Hiccup, I've known Snotlout longer than you. Yes, he's a complete moron sometimes, but he's loyal and ambitious and honest. And he's having a rough time adjusting, just like we are." Stepping towards the window, where Hiccup was crouched and fiddling with his block of ice, she leaned over and pressed her hands into her knees. "Think-he's lost a lot because of you and me. But if we get him to trust us, just imagine what the rest of the village will think."

She heard a quiet scoff behind her. "Great, love being a pawn."

"And you!" Astrid whirled around, razing the space between them in just a few angry strides. "He is Stoick's son! The chief has always treated you like you were his own, and the minute Hiccup shows up, you turn on him, because suddenly you're not heir to the throne anymore. That man deserves better from his brother and especially from you!" She stepped closer when Snotlout tried to turn away. "You're pissed because I broke our engagement. I'm sorry that hurt you. But all this male ego and bravado and fighting just reminds me _why_ I wanted to make my own choices."

"It's not that simple, Astrid!" Snot banged a fist against his chair. "You of all people should know about a man's honor-"

"Honor?" She cut him off, laughing harshly. "Yeah, I know about honor. Scraping my ass out of bed for training every morning, trying to be better than every Viking out there. I've been chasing my family's honor since before you even realized I was a girl. And what has it gotten me, Snot? Nothing!" There was something unraveling in her chest, some tight knot coming loose. "My uncle was driven off the island because of _honor_. I was supposed to be perfect to get it back, to marry somebody I didn't love for it. But in the end, nobody cares whether or not you spent your whole life dedicated to being the best or keeping the village safe. They turn on you in a _heartbeat._"

Astrid pointed at Hiccup. "Family, though? That's what's left when everyone else bails." Glancing back at her mate, she met his gaze from beneath his lashes just for a second. Then she looked back. "Hiccup's your family. Stoick's your family."

"My dad's my family," Snotlout challenged, lifting his chin.

"And _my_ dad's _mine_." Her gut twisted. "Look, if you want to fight someone, I'll volunteer. After this week is over, you can throw all the punches you want. But until then, I need you-" She stepped back. "I need _both_ of you to play nice. Hiccup's good with the dragons, but I need you to get everyone on board with this plan. That's something I can't do, no matter how much I rally."

Snot didn't reply. He tightened his jaw and stared into the fire, not meeting her persistent gaze. She thought that he'd give, that he'd see logic if she just tried to get it through his skull that they weren't his enemy. But despite everything, he was unmoved.

Astrid flicked her eyes towards the ceiling, straightening. She pushed the paste Gothi had made to the edge of the table so Snotlout could reach it and then turned towards the door.

"C'mon, Hiccup. Let's go tell the twins he's not dead."

* * *

><p>The thing Gobber had created looked more like a harpoon than any spear or arrow Astrid had ever seen. It was longer than her leg, but probably just as wide around, with terrifying serrations along the spine. Astrid grunted as she hefted it back into the half-built launcher that the blacksmith and Hiccup had designed together.<p>

"It has ta be lighter," Stoick sighed, shaking his head. He stepped back to evaluate the thing once more. "If it's heavy for her, it'll be heavy for the rest of the men. They need ta be able ta move it quickly."

"Och," Gobber groaned, scratching at his head with his hook. "I can only do so much."

"What about hollowing it out?" Astrid suggested, a little out of breath. It really was a magnificent piece of work, and it hadn't even been detailed yet. Still, there were too many improvements to be made in too little time.

"Means I can only make half as many," Gobber replied. Making a circle around the launcher, he sniffed and twitched his moustached mouth. "And yeh risk making it more likely ta shatter than pierce."

"Mm." She furrowed her brow and nibbled at her thumb thoughtfully. Despite his humble childhood, Hiccup was better at this stuff than she was- building and thinking outside the box. He could probably come up with a better solution, but she was hesitant to talk to him about weapons and killing ever since that first war council.

"What if..." Stoick stepped to the other side of the forge, to Gobber's desk, and picked up a pencil. "What if yeh made it in interlocking pieces? They could be made bigger, without having to worry about the weight."

"Tha's an idea," Gobber nodded. Astrid leaned forward, but couldn't see the chief's sketch. "It'd be more detail, but if the pieces are smaller anyway, I can stick Legs with the basic shaping."

"Hiccup might enjoy helping," Stoick commented. His eyes slid to Astrid as he spoke, as if he wasn't sure he had the right to an opinion. "He goes on and on about this place."

"He does," she agreed with a tight smile. She could see Hiccup soaking up all of the smithing knowledge and making a pair of wings for himself, just like they'd made a fin for Toothless.

The chief rubbed the back of his neck, looking so much like his son, and looked back at the weapon. "I'll need ta do some paperwork before we leave," he sighed. "Make sure everything is in order for him in case something happens ta me."

Something cold clamped down on her lungs. Astrid paused in her nail-biting to glance at Stoick, but she could only take a few seconds of his face before she dropped her gaze to the ground. This plan, of course, could end in death for many. The thought of losing even one man in the upcoming battle made her anxious, but for Hiccup to lose the father he'd just found- just the idea made her sick.

"How bad do you think it'll be?" she asked, voice small.

Both men looked at each other for a second before Stoick replied. "You would know better than us," he answered quietly. "You've seen this monster. We haven't."

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. She wanted him to tell her that they were Vikings, that it was an occupational hazard. That the danger they faced was nothing compared to the potential safety of their home. She thought about little Alma and Abram, about the children she might someday have- she'd wanted him to tell her that was a future she could look forward to. But if Stoick the Vast, strongest and bravest Viking to ever live was concerned for his life, that domestic dream she imagined could disappear in a breath of smoke.

"It's all or nothing," she mumbled, reaching out to touch the smooth side of the prototype's blade. "If she's as big as I remember, it might be our final stand."

"Then it's a good thing we have a plan," Gobber said cheerfully. He hobbled around the launcher and rested his hand on her shoulder. His smile was paternal and supportive. "It's not yer fight, Astrid. We're not going ta war because of you. This dragon belongs ta all of us. So don't be so hard on yerself, eh?"

She tried to summon a sincere smile, but it was hard to think positively with the enormous harpoon standing in front of her. Still, she nodded and lifted her chin. "I think our plan will work. Once we perfect the weaponry, everything'll go smoothly."

Her forced optimism was interrupted by a knock at the forge door. They turned to see one of the villagers standing with nervousness in his eyes.

"Chief," he swallowed, bowing his head in a quick nod of respect. "Dragons in the village. Out by the cliffs. What do we do?"

Stoick straightened, features hardening and fists tightening. "Ring the alarm, but don't engage. Defend. Find Hiccup and-"

"It's not a raid," the villager interrupted, briefly glancing behind him. "The dragons, they're not stealing or attacking, they're just... waiting."

"Waiting?" The chief's brow crinkled, and he looked to Astrid.

She shook her head, clueless. Taking the lead, she jogged past the messenger and ran through the thick of the village. People were running in the same direction, conversation and gossip clattering between houses. Some of them asked her and Stoick what was going on, but they couldn't answer, so they just ignored. Soon the crowd became

so thick that she had to gently elbow and _excuse me_ past men and women.

A hand grabbed her arm, and she jumped before realizing who it was. Hiccup grinned at her, tugging her forward. "Come see," he told her, and then she was letting him pull her to the edge of the herd of onlookers.

Her feet slowed before her brain could even fully catch up. Like reflex, the sight of dragons on Berk made her hand itch towards her back to loosen her axe. But the apprehensive pounding of her heart slowly melted into a relieved flutter. She gasped out a laugh and pressed her palm to her forehead.

The gathered villagers made noises of anxious fear when the Monstrous Nightmare began clawing forward. At his flank, the Gronkle waddled and the Zippleback trudged close by. Astrid could hear her breath in her ears, feel her pulse thrumming in the hand Hiccup held tightly. The three dragons she'd nursed and fed and played with slowly crawled forward. Then one by one, they all bowed low, even the dangerous, terrifying Nightmare.

"Hiccup?" Stoick murmured, awe in his voice. "What do they want?"

Astrid squeezed her mate's hand and grinned. "To help."

End
file.